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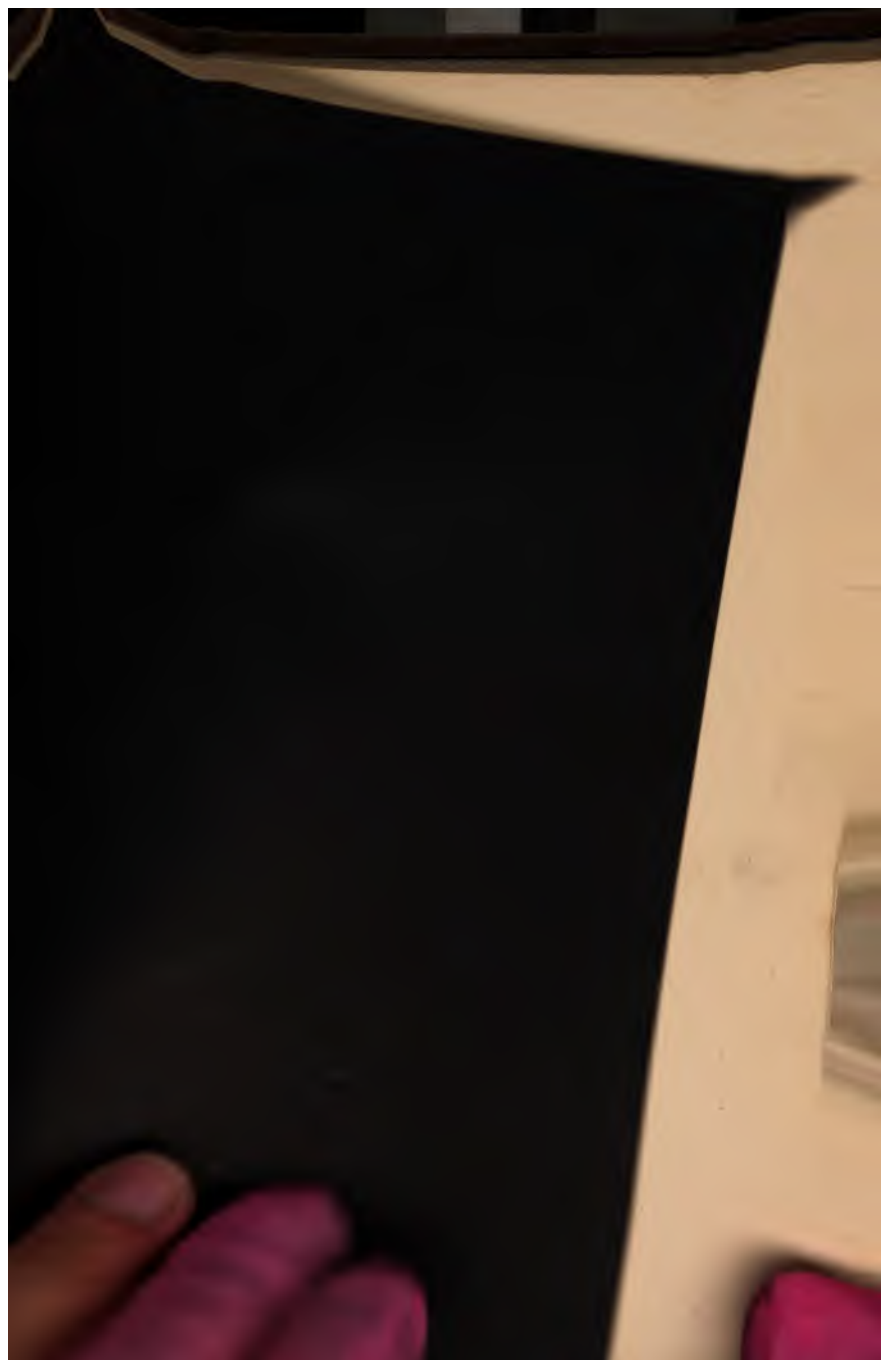
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# IN A VAIN SHADOW.

A *Novel*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

EVANGELINE F. SMITH.

"This should have been a noble creature: he  
Hath all the energy which would have made  
A goodly frame of glorious elements,  
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,  
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—  
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts—  
Mix'd and contending without end or order,  
All dormant or destructive: he will perish,  
And yet he must not; \* \* \* \* \*  
For such are worth redemption.

BYRON.

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VOL. I.

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AS FIRST FRUITS AT A SHRINE,

I DEDICATE THESE PAGES

TO MY EVER BELOVED FATHER AND MOTHER,

REGINALD SOUTHWELL AND EMILY GENEVIÈVE SMITH.



# IN A VAIN SHADOW.

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## PROLOGUE.

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### I.

But see! his face is black and full of blood;  
His eyelids further out than when he lived,  
Staring full ghastly, like a strangled man,  
His hair upreared, his nostrils stretched with struggling;  
His hands abroad displayed, as one that gasped  
And tugged for life, and was by strength subdued;  
His well-proportioned beard made rough and ragged,  
Like to the summer's corn by tempest lodged.  
It cannot be but he was murdered here—  
The least of all these signs is probable!

SHAKESPEARE.

It is Christmas Eve in the year of Our Lord  
185—.

The wind sweeps wet and wild across  
a mist-enshrouded moor, clouds of ghost-  
like vapour hang upon the slopes of darkly  
looming hills, and the December twilight is  
dying into darkness. Great forest trees  
stand solemnly around, like armies encamp-  
ing under shelter of the night, and the gale,  
hissing across the heath, enters their gloom-  
infested ranks, and wails fitfully around their  
bending heads. A cheerful light is gleaming  
from the windows of a rough mud cottage on

the green plot between the forest and the moor, and towards this friendly beacon, forgetful of the dangerous pitfalls concealed by thick twinings of tangled heath, a tall stooping man, with a child in his arms, is struggling bravely through trackless swamps and bewildering groves of tall wet fern. None witness his laborious progress but a pair of owls, which follow him with boding screech, and a herd of frightened deer whose track he has crossed, and who, arrested in their wild career, stand on rising ground, looking down with apprehensive eyes upon the harmless pair. At last they reach the low thatched dwelling, which a discoloured, swinging signboard announces to be the "Traveller's Rest," and, pushing open the creaking door, enter a little bar-room, round whose glowing fire a group of rustics are drinking. An oil lamp burns odorously on the beer-stained counter, and its dull light falling on the new-comers, shows them to be a man of singular appearance, with broad strong shoulders, large defiant eyes, and dark red hair abundant and unkempt, and a small girl, whose form is almost hidden in a tangled profusion of long fair curls. A prolonged stare reveals to the drinking gossips that the father is the unknown stranger whose appearance in the village a fortnight since had excited the curiosity of the country people, who gives no account of himself but that he is from America, and

who is reported darkly to be a man of ultra-Radical principles, a foe of English institutions, an avowed contemner of Church and Constitution. After a prolonged pause, during which the traveller, as he drinks the ale the landlord offers him, remains the object of universal scrutiny, one of the company greets him with a nod of recognition. He is a grizzled, ill-favoured fellow, of sinewy strength despite his fifty or sixty years, and by his livery and coronetted buttons, is evidently a servant in some family of rank. His vacant eye grows sharp and stealthy as it falls upon the traveller.

"Mr. Marley!" he says, "you, that be but a stranger in our parts, takin' a little maid like that across Culpepper He'th after dark? 'Tis a bold ventur, master, and, if ye'll take my advice, ye'll bide at the 'Rest' till day-break, for the he'th's full o' holes, and ye're like as not to break yer neck if ye try to get over to St. Dunstan's to-night wi'out some 'un with ye as knows the way."

"Forty years," answers the stranger dreamily, "forty years since last I crossed Culpepper Heath, and yet I hardly thought but what I should have found my way across. It was only this afternoon that I made up my mind to catch the night train to London, and I thought I would take my time about it and walk over the old ground upon my way, but the fog grew dense soon after we started, we lost our track, and, but for the light from

these windows, might have been wandering in the heath all night. A cheerful way, truly, to keep Christmas Eve, but not worse, after all, than the manner in which millions of men and women like ourselves will keep it, lying down after hours of exhausting labour on beds of straw, beneath broken roofs through which the rain is beating ; filthy, starving, and half naked ! ”

He drops down on the settle as he speaks, and looks around him wearily, yet with a fierce light burning in his eyes.

“ I wonder if there is one among you, neighbours,” he resumes, lifting the child on his knee, “ who to-night would see a wretched beggar shivering at your doors, and refuse to share your Christmas crust with him. And if you recognise such charity as the commonest duty of humanity, why, in God’s Name, do you stand, hat in hand, scraping your feet before a woman who yearly spends thousands in selfish luxury, while her fellow-creatures are dying of want around her. Is the proud lady at the Castle yonder, better, wiser, in any way of superior make to you whom she treats as animals and chattels ? And if not, how comes it that you passively consent to see her waste in wanton parade the gold, which shared with you, would make you all self-helpful educated citizens, fit to bear the part which is your birth-right in the government of your country ? Be slaves if so you must ! but at least cease to hug your

chains, and refuse to lick the foot that bows your heads into the dust!"

The stranger's speech, uttered in deep, musical tones, vibrating with repressed passion, awakens a certain stolid interest in the rather unimpressionable group that hear him, and one or two—bolder spirits—look up, a certain ominous brightness in their eyes.

"Ah, I see!" resumes the speaker, the tacit response which he receives arousing a more lively emotion in his tone, "there is good stuff here, and combustible too, if only the spark can be applied—brave hearts who need but to be banded together under one binding inspiring head, to go forward and *compel* the world to hear them claim the rights which God has given, and man has stolen from them! But who among you all is sufficient for such a part? Self-control, education, free thought have been denied you!—you lie disarmed among your enemies!"

The wild roar of the wind and the loud splash of rain against the rattling panes fall mournfully on the ear when the stranger halts for breath. The landlady flings a damp log on the fire, which hisses and smoulders as it touches the red, low embers.

"But what," begin again the low thrilling accents, which, when they cease, leave a blank upon the ear, like some departed strain of music, "but what, my brothers, if one should step forth from the very ranks of the oppressors? an aristocrat in birth and



blood, who should have the manhood to fling aside the selfish traditions of his caste, and throw in his lot with the people, to live and die for them, to share his lands with them, to set them free by the irresistible force of knowledge and culture from the degrading bondage in which they lie enslaved. Would not all England's down-trodden sons rise with one heart to join his standard, and inaugurate the new reign of Justice, Freedom, and Fraternity, with a voice which should shake to its foundation the throne of your female despot ? ”

A low murmur of disapprobation runs round the audience as they begin to perceive that the enthusiast is irreverently including Queen Victoria in his wholesale condemnation of existing things, and, while the attention of the drinkers is momentarily distracted by the burning questions he has raised, the elderly serving-man rises softly, creeps across to the traveller, who with glowing eyes awaits the result of his impassioned, appeal, and breathing hard, whispers in his ear—

“ If so be ye reely do want to get up to Lunnon by the night train, master, I'm goin' myself across the He'th to fetch a bottle of physic from St. Dunstan's for our housekeeper, and you might go alongside of me, for, man and boy, I've known every hole and turnin' o' Culpepper He'th fifty year or more. The Lard have mercy on ye, if ye try to get across alone to-night.”

The traveller, pleased at the notion of having an escort, thanks the old man.

"Have we a chance of catching the last train though?" he adds, with some anxiety.

"Christmas Eve!" replies Mr. Tibbetts reflectively. "Ye-es, ye'll do it, I reckon, for the trains be all after time to-night, an hour or more. But you should start pretty sharp. How is it, pray master, that ye've been and changed your mind so soon? Didn't I hear you tell her ladyship this very afternoon as how you'd bide here some days longer?"

"Is that your affair?" answers the stranger, with a haughtiness that contrasts rather oddly with his Republican principles.

"He, he, he!" laughs Tibbetts foolishly. There is something queer about the man to-night, his laughter is mirthless and yet extravagant, and at intervals during the last few minutes he has started and looked over his shoulder, as though some one were hiding behind him. "He, he, he! that's a good 'un! But I say, master, don't 'ee go for to say nothin' about my comin' along with ye to the town, or young Cosins yonder as like as not will be after us. He always wants to be hangin' on to me wherever I goes, and for my part I likes to keep to myself, without I can do a good turn to a neighbour. I'll slip out quiet like d'rec'ly minute, and wait for ye in the lane, and ye can come out and jine me when ye've paid yer reckonin'."

Meantime political discussion runs high, and, in the vehement counter-fire of positive affirmation and flat contradiction, the noiseless exit of Peter Tibbetts goes unheeded. The traveller rises, lingers to say a few more fervid words to the now inattentive company, pays his debt, carefully rearranges his knapsack on his shoulder, and wraps his little daughter in a large, rough shawl.

"Daddy, I am so sleepy!" she exclaims plaintively. "I want to have my sop and go to bed directly!"

"'Tis a thousand shames to keep the poor little maid up and about at such an hour," says the landlady, giving out change from the bar, and smoothing back her greasy ringlets.

She is a cross, depressed-looking woman, with an unpleasant voice and much faded finery about her person, but the sight of the fair little child awakes a tender sentiment within her, and she wraps a few brown peppermints in a scrap of newspaper, and presses them into the dimpled hand.

"'Tis an 'orrid night to be out in, too," she adds, "and I wouldn't trust chick o' mine among them great blowin' trees, which may as like as not come down in such a storm as this. There's a coffin in the candle too, so sure as my name is Tilda Tagg. Let it alone, Tagg, I say, or mischief 'll come of it; 'tain't no good meddlin' with they sort of things!"

The landlord complies with his lady's mandate, opens the door for his guest, and, protecting the guttering candle with his hand from the driving wind and rain, lights him along the soaked pathway with its border of ragged currant bushes. Beyond the rickety garden gate, lurking in the muddy lane that leads by the heath's edge, he catches sight of the slouching figure of Peter Tibbetts.

"That there Marley, as I s'pose he calls hisself, for that were the name on his knapsack," says the landlord, shutting out the storm that is driving the smoke from the chimney into the room, "that there Marley is a dangerous chap, depend upon it, gentlemen. It's not that there ain't truth in what he says—for, for my part, I hold that we should do a deal better without the game laws and the bishops—but he says out everything too plain-like for my liking, and might easy enough get himself and any one who minds him into trouble."

"He sings another tune before the quality, I warrant ye," says Mrs. Tagg, who, impatient of the late hours kept by her guests, has already half her head in curl papers. "Her ladyship would never have had'n up to the Castle, and took notice of 'n, as I am told she has, if she could have heard a word of what he's said to-night. There's more money has found its way into his pockets, folks say, than has ever gone into the village

since Sir Kenelm died. There! he's got round her somehow, I s'pose!—some folks know how to feather their own nests, and to get other folks into trouble at the same time. Don't you have nothin' to say to 'im, Tagg, mind what I tell 'ee."

"I'd give summat to know what he carries in that there bag he's so precious choice over," says another. "They say he's never let it go from 'im, sleeping' or waking, since he's been at the 'Harold.' You had ought to have put a friendly question to 'im, Mr. Tagg, and persuaded him to treat us to a peep inside for a consideration."

"Hist, all of ye! What's that noise?" exclaims—after a discussion of some ten minutes on the knotty point of the mysterious knapsack—a thin man, seated in the window. And listening, as he lifts his finger, the little company can catch, between the fitful bursts of the night-storm, the sound of a long, low cry.

"'Tis only the wind," declares Mr. Tagg; of course, within his own precincts, an unimpeachable authority on all debated questions. "It yells like a cat to-night. We've not had such a storm as this since the eve poor grandfer died—three years ago come Candlemas."

## II.

THE clouds scud across the sky, the moon's disc is obscured, the wind moans cheerlessly over the wet-washed heath. Rain is plashing in the inky waters of a pool, and the boom of the bittern is heard across the waste. Suddenly the clouds part! And the Moon—the heaven's soft Eye—looks down upon a horrid sight. Two men are grappling with each other in mortal conflict. One of them has struck the other from behind, for from the back of his neck the blood is issuing and, with desperate energy, he struggles for his life. Not a word is spoken, nor cry uttered; only, mingling with the gust, there falls and rises the sound of fast, deep, labouring breath. At last the wounded man stumbles, falls, and while, putting forth frantically the strength which is ebbing fast with the oozing life-blood, he makes a final effort to regain his footing, the other leaps upon him, and the placid moonlight shows him kneeling upon the chest of his fallen foe, transformed by murder's madness into a wild beast, which tears and mutilates for the very wanton pleasure of the act. Jerking his arm free from the clutch that encumbers it, he plunges his stout knife again and again into the prostrate victim's shrinking flesh, striking here, there, and everywhere, till scarce a feature can be recognised, and dashing it finally into the wildly

straining eyeballs. Then, as the last shriek of agony bursts from the gashed lips that are growing rigid in death, he springs to his feet with the appalling bound of an infuriated ape, and, seizing his heavy club-stick from the ground, smashes in with repeated blows the skull of an already senseless corpse.

The moon goes in, and when she next looks forth the murderer has raised the mangled body on his shoulders; and, clutching tightly the stained knapsack, and bowing low beneath his ghastly burden, stumbles blindly towards the pond. There is a loud fall—a splash—and the cold spray dashes up upon the murderer's face. Freed from the cumbering load of flesh, he lifts himself up with a hiss of relief; then bends again, and stares into the waters. And lo! the dead man turns over in the pond; the horror-stricken, livid, mutilated features come again to view; and two empty sockets glare up frightfully at the living man's starting eyes. Uttering a hideous yell, he leaps aside; and, turning his back upon his evil deed, rushes madly off into the darkness of the night.

And now that he has vanished, as a blue-bell springs unbidden in a solitary dell, a little form arises from the tall, drenched bracken, and a feeble voice is lifted like the bleat of a lamb which has lost its mother. Faint and piteous is the oft-repeated cry, but no kind voice replies, no strong, fatherly arms open to enfold the forsaken baby. She fights

her way onward through the tangled fern with bursting sobs—the wind drives her back, the rain beats upon her head ! Yet, in the darkness, piercing the thick clouds that obscure the sky, an Eye rests on her, brighter, more watchful, and more kind than Night's cold-smiling orb. God—the Champion of the weak—beholds the child, and makes her wrongs His own.

At last the wind, which hitherto has mocked and drowned her voice, drops momentarily, and bears the sound of her wail to the revellers who are returning homeward from the "Rest." Steps approach—the child is surrounded by rough, kindly labouring-men. They take her in their arms, and she sobs out her woeful tale, while by the lantern's light they search around for the missing man who is lying stark within the pond.

### III.

THE red firelight glows pleasantly on the wide hearth of a cottage kitchen, and flickering shadows fall on the cross-beamed roof, the rough brick floor, the diamond-paned windows, overlapped by deep thatched eaves, the tall, ticking, eight-day clock, and the corner cupboard, with its rich display of old flowered china. Humming the Christmas Hymn to herself, a neat, old woman, in a snowy cap and blue checked apron, is passing



to and fro before the fire. She has been decking the pictures with sprigs of holly, and now is frying eggs and bacon, which frizzle and splutter on the hearth, for her absent husband's supper. The hour grows late—the potatoes have long ago been roasted, and smoke invitingly upon the embers; the tortoiseshell cat purrs contentedly in the big armchair; the old dame opens the door, and peers out into the night. But no coming-footfall can be heard, the rain dashes in her face, and closing it again to shut out the noise of the creaking branches, she puts on her spectacles and sits down to read her nightly portion in the well-worn family Bible. A low tap falls upon the window. She thinks it is merely some bough striking against the panes, and pays no heed. But it is repeated, and Sally, turning, sees a face such as one sometimes sees in a bad dream—like her husband's, and yet so unlike, that it may well have been assumed in mockery by some evil goblin, to frighten her. She passes her hand across her eyes, and, before she can remove it to look again, a hissing whisper comes—

“Are ye alone? Are ye alone, wife? Then let me in, quick, for pity's sake!”

Sick with nameless fear, Sally hastens to the door, and lifts the latch with trembling fingers. But oh, what a sight to meet a wife's fond gaze! this stooping figure, with its livid cheeks, staring eyes, and dark discoloured patches on its clothing. He stretches

out his shaking arm to grasp her, but she, starting back, with hands uplifted in dumb dismay, eludes his touch ; for his fingers are stained, and the club-stick which he carries has human hair entangled in its woody fibres. An invisible presence seems impalpably to diffuse itself about the room—that ghostly atmosphere of crime which ever pursues the murderer—the intangible vengeance of the wronged and angry Dead. The cat arches her back and hisses, and Sally, stumbling back into her chair, sits speechless, with gaping mouth and vacant, foolish eyes, while the kettle boils over unheeded on the fire.

“D—n the woman !” growls the murderer, glancing fearfully over his shoulder, towards the door. “In the devil’s name, why can’t you get up and help me ? Come, Sall, old ‘ooman,” he continues, in a voice of pitiable wheedling entreaty, “you ain’t the gal to throw a fellow over when he’s got into a bit of trouble ;” and he shakes her, to rouse her from her stupor ; while she, casting off the fingers which leave five fearful imprints on her shoulder, bursts into a wild, long laugh.

And now his wife herself becomes an object of dread to the guilty man. He shrinks away from her whom his crime has robbed of reason, snatches up her scissors, and tries to tear out the marks upon his clothes.

“Dash it all ! How many there are !” He must slash all his garments into rags to get rid of them.

Hurrying into the back kitchen, he puts his face beneath the tap, and is beginning his ghastly ablutions, when a sound falls on his ear with such a shock as will come to the unready soul at the blowing of the last trumpet. There is a knocking at the door, and the voices of men are heard clámouring for admittance. Not an instant may be lost, and while on the garden side the avengers are demanding him, Peter slips out through the back door into the darkness, fit act for one upon whose soul are closing in the black shadows of eternal night !

#### IV.

THEY are hunting betimes in Rotherhame parish to-day, although it is Christmas morning, and the church bells are ringing in the festival. But the chase is not the stag flying swiftly from her foes, nor the fox doubling from the pursuit of eager hounds, only a wretched man, worn and breathless, whose teeth chatter together as he tears along at a speed so desperate that even the strong men and boys upon his track can scarce gain ground upon him.

It is a pitiful sight, for he is alone in the presence of his enemies ; their instinct of sport is aroused, and the hand of man is turned against him who has shed man's blood, and on whom God has set a brand,

that finding, man may destroy him. They rush on his track with yells and shouts, and he, whose tongue is dry and whose knees are yielding, feels that his strength is spent and that he can go no further.

A vision of the oft-frequented village church, looming through the film that clouds his eyes, adds a moment's duration to his endurance. The door stands open—he stumbles through it and slams it heavily behind him—the hunters rush forward with a shout of triumph, and, dashing themselves against it, find it locked. In one second the building is surrounded, and every mode of exit watched.

He is in a trap now, and cannot escape, them. Yet, though sure of their prey, impatience will not suffer them to linger for the forcing of the door, and an entrance is effected through a window in the transept. One by one they drop into the church, which, to all appearance empty, lies bright and peaceful in its Christmas garb of yew and holly.

Pews, pulpit, gallery, belfry, vestry are ransacked, nor is a corner left unscanned, but no vestige of the murderer can be found. Whether the devil has come in person to carry off his vassal bodily to infernal chains, or whether the same malign spirit has interfered to save him by miracle from human punishment, one thing is sure: he has

escaped their hands, and not all the efforts of baffled justice, nor every detective in Scotland Yard, can avail to bring him back from the viewless shades which, without warning, have enwrapped him from human ken.

## CHAPTER I.

Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,  
The reb-ribbed ledges drip with silent horror of blood,  
And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers "Death."  
TENNYSON.

And this huge castle standing here sublime !  
I love to see the look with which it braves,  
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,  
The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.  
WORDSWORTH.

THE curtain rises, and discloses a great expanse of moorland country with a vast sweep of wintry sky above. A train is rushing at full speed towards a distant town, leaving a steamy track on the clear cold air.

It was the close of a fine December day. The sun was hastening homeward to the west after his brief winter's day of work, but, before abandoning the world to the chill embrace of night, he flung upon it a parting benediction, a hue of gay vermillion, which gladdened sky and earth, and glorified ploughed fields and blasted heaths into transitory beauty.

The train was a little behind time, and now that it had reached a level plain, and that on the horizon the dim outline of towers and steeples was becoming visible through a blue ascending cloud of smoke, it redoubled speed, and such of its passengers as were

bound for St. Dunstan's began to rouse themselves from stolen sleeps, to collect their belongings, and to hunt out their tickets.

Throwing down the window of a first-class carriage in the back end of the train, a tall, blooming girl of some seventeen years, leaned far out, and, regardless of the blast which swept bleakly in her face, gazed long and eagerly on the scene around her.

Her eyes, whose blue brightness recalled in the midst of winter bygone days of summer splendour, fell first on the rows of gaunt fir-trees which, fringing the rising ground towards the west, stood out like sentinels against the glowing sunset heaven, then travelled to the north, where sullen heights guarded the horizon, and finally rested upon the distant town, whose clustering roofs gathered about its square Minster towers, like a flock of sheep around their shepherd.

"Now, dear Geraldine," cooed a soft voice from the interior of the carriage, "think a little of the comfort of others. You don't seem to consider that you are entirely preventing Papa and all the rest of us from enjoying the prospect."

"Never mind, never mind me!" observed a deeper voice. "Stay where you are, Diney, if you don't find it too cold, that is—only be sure you let us know as soon as you catch a glimpse of Rotherhame Castle. And the fine Roman encampment, too, about which I was

reading to you. We must on no account miss that."

"Oh, yes, you stopped short at the encampment, and never went on to give us any information about the interesting old castle," rejoined the first speaker, who did her best to compensate by an uncritical general appreciation of her husband's archæological researches for her hopeless ignorance with regard to their details. "Do pray go on, my love, and treat us to a few particulars of its style of architecture, and history, and all that."

"This magnificent relic of the feudal ages," promptly began the husband, who needed but the slightest encouragement to give his companions the benefit of his guide-book discoveries, and who, blindly disregarding the teachings of experience, was ever ready to place renewed faith in his wife's disingenuous expressions of interest. "This magnificent relic of the feudal ages dates in great part from the reign of Richard I., and was erected on the site of an earlier building, which had for two centuries been used as a fortified residence by the Saxon kings of England. The lovers of antiquity will be interested to learn that, with a brief interval during the Commonwealth when it was sequestered and bestowed on one of Cromwell's officers, Rotherhame Castle has continued in the hands of King Ealred's descendants ever since. By the kind permission



of the Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley every facility is offered to visitors wishing to examine the ruins and state apartments. The more private portions of the building are likewise rich in interest, and may be visited by obtaining an order from the agent for the estates, Captain Charles Browel. The eastern extremity, including the gate-house and a part of the barbican, are in a ruinous condition ; but the centre, which is of Norman date, and the west end where the Early English style prevails, are in good pres :”—

Here the reader was interrupted by his daughter, who, turning from her post of observation with a malicious smile, snatched the book from his hands.

“I regret to inform you, father,” she exclaimed, “that, during your prolonged consultation of the learned Mr. Murray, the train has whirled us out of sight of the Roman encampment, if indeed the dreary mud heaps which I have seen vanishing behind that copse, *can* be the famous remains on whose glories you have been expatiating.”

“Mud heaps, indeed ! Is that the way you speak of a spot in which have been enacted some of the most stirring scenes of history, and whose soil was once steeped in patriotic British blood ?” returned her father, springing from his seat and putting his head far out of the window. “Yes, we have passed it, sure enough,” he added, indignantly scanning the horizon. “I am really

quite disappointed, and it was very naughty of you not to have warned me."

"Oh, how I wish that you girls inherited a little more of *our* archæological spirit!" sighed the mother, looking about her the while, with an air of good-natured abstraction.

She was a comfortable-looking mother, whose old-fashioned and somewhat careless attire could not conceal the fact that she was a lady born and bred, and whose figure, despite its soft matronly rotundity, was yet sufficiently slim and plastic to suggest the conclusion that her youth was not far past, while her sweet blue eyes, pretty full lips, and cheeks of gently fading bloom, showed that she had once possessed a considerable share of beauty.

"Papa has received a righteous punishment for the interminable columns of Murray and Bradshaw he has been inflicting on us," said his daughter, while at the same moment she pulled off her father's skull-cap, kissed his brow, and then handed him down his hat with an apologetic air.

"Just hear her talk," resumed the mother, wishful to obtain for herself a little cheap credit at Geraldine's expense. "Really, George, these girls of ours are not fit to travel if they have no appreciation of such beautiful sights and objects; making such a fuss about eating their good sandwiches too, and never being in proper time to start. We had better leave them at home in future."

"I wonder *you* have the face to call us to account for that, you darling hypocritical thing," said a younger girl, in whose hair and glowing healthful face were a cheerful blending of nut-brown, red-gold, and other bright autumnal tints. "I put it to Papa's honour to say who it was that, after she had scolded her daughter for being late, was obliged herself to stop the horses, and run all over the house to hunt for her gloves and muff."

"Or rather let him remind us of any single occasion on which she has been punctual," returned the elder sister. "Never mind, sweet mother, we will forgive you this once, and now if you make haste and come to the window you will see something really worth looking at, a lovely old castle, with the sun upon its windows. That is Rotherhame, is it not, Papa?"

The whole party rushed to the window, and, following the direction of Geraldine's finger, gazed towards a steep eminence behind the approaching town, on whose summit a mass of stern grey towers reared their grim heads above a forest of naked trees. A bank of moody night clouds was piled heavily behind them, and, dimly visible in the deepening gloom of the east, the ancient building looked like some threatening spectre, come back from the land of the Silent Dead to chide the unthinking levity of the world that has forgotten him.

"Ah! it is a grand sight," said the antiquarian father. "Norman architecture always impresses me more than I can say. One feels a kind of awe before those giant arches which, in their immense simplicity give utterance to the thoughts of great untaught souls living in solitude before the presence of God."

"It is strange that a mass of wood and stone should have power to stir one with such a sense of affinity," said Geraldine, pensively. "I suppose it must be that a building like this is the expression of an idea from minds with which we are in sympathy. How I do love our forefathers! I don't think that, with all their faults, they were vulgar, or matter-of-fact, or hard-headed, like the dreadful people one meets so often now-a-days, who believe in nothing but themselves."

At this moment the slackened speed of the train gave warning that it was approaching its destination.

A scene of general confusion ensued. The Archdeacon—for such dignity his gaitered legs, shovelled hat, and bearing, affable with the geniality of the great, proclaimed him to have attained—thrust his *Guardian* and guide-book into his black bag, strapped up his railway rug, stretched himself and yawned. His wife grasped a waterproof cloak, bonnet-box, and sundry parcels with a defiant glance at the advancing porter. A fair, mild young lady, whose ostentatiously humble demeanour and large cheap cross, proclaimed

her unmistakably to be a High Church governess, pocketed the last volume of the "Lily Series," smoothed her stray locks back with her fingers, and tried hard to induce her patroness to part with a portion of her burdens, while the two young girls who completed the party looked on with idle amusement at the excitement of their elders. The train stopped, the Archdeacon carried off the porter to the luggage van, and, after a brief delay, the entire company found themselves tightly packed in the small one-horse brougham which awaited them at the station entrance.

"De—ar Mrs. Egerton," murmured the young governess confidently, as she leaned forward from the back seat, which, after a sharp contest, she had succeeded in wresting from the Archdeacon, "I am afraid you are feeling what the boys would call 'awfully done' after your long journey! It is nice to think that you are going to have a thorough change at last, and a long rest from the parish. It is so pleasant too, to be going where we shall enjoy real Church privileges! Dr. Bogle's articles in the *Earnest Churchwoman* would alone be sufficient to stamp him a man of the right sort."

"Ah, poor dear man! it is my great comfort in being parted from the darling children this Christmas to think that we may do something to brighten up that desolate home of his. His wife was such a sweet woman,

Miss Nutting, and used to confide all her little troubles to me. *She* was not one of those cold unget-at-able creatures who look ready to eat you up if you try to show them a little sympathy, and she had a great deal to put up with in her own lot, my dear. It is quite curious how cranky and irritable the best of men can be if everything does not go exactly to their taste at home, quite forgetting that the poor wife cannot be here, there, and everywhere at once, ensuring that no detail shall ever go wrong."

"Bogle is a very worthy man, and without doubt a zealous churchman," said the Archdeacon, innocently unconscious of his wife's sidelong reference to himself, "and yet there is something about him that keeps one from feeling quite comfortable in his presence. He acts, I fancy, rather on the principle of the theologian who said: 'Orthodoxy is my doxy—heterodoxy is your doxy.'"

"Say no more, my love," said his wife, meaningly, "Dr. Bogle may, perhaps, be a rough diamond, but he is a thorough, good, sterling man. It is most kind of him to invite us to spend Christmas with him, and there are those bad girls always too prone to satirize and make fun of everybody, without wanting you to put it into their heads."

"Quite so, quite so," returned the Archdeacon, nodding with an air of private understanding and approval of his wife's caution,

and looking round with a guilty sensation on the carriage of the man whose character he had been criticising.

The carriage at this moment struck into the populous High Street, where the projecting gables of quaint lath-and-plaster houses glowed red in the sun's last rays, and the windows rattled beneath the strong merry blast of the rising wind. Thanks to his earlier study of the despised guide-book, the Archdeacon was able to impart abundant information to his now interested companions.

For many centuries, he told them, this town had been an appanage of the Harolds of Rotherhame, an ancient race of royal lineage, who, since the days when their ancestors had kept their wattle-fenced Court in its vicinity, had exercised a kind of feudal sway over its inhabitants. The fortunes of the Harolds were inseparably interwoven with the historic annals of the borough, their fortified castle, from its high standing-ground towards the east, looked down upon the town walls with an aspect at once menacing and protecting, and though, as if in evidence that the right divine of their seigneurs was already questioned, tall manufacturing chimneys here and there intruded with revolutionary boldness among ancient inns and alms houses bearing the cognisance of the White Leopard, the visits of the reigning Earl were still regarded by the townsfolk as events of high importance.

The young governess, making frantic efforts to throw herself into the spirit of his remarks, belauded with indiscriminate admiration every building, ancient or modern, common or uncommon, on which her enthusiastic eye chanced to light, calling them all "very pretty!" as she would have described alike her last exploit in crochet, Handel's *Messiah*, or the Himalaya Mountains. And now, along narrow alleys bordered by squalid cottages, and beneath a huge stone gateway surmounted by an earl's coronet and leopard rampant, they passed on into the solemn shade of Rotherhame Forest. The measured sound of the horse's even foot-falls fell pleasantly on ears long deafened by the rumble of the train, and they bowed peacefully along over turf roads scattered with red leaves, while overhead the leafless branches of the stately beeches met and embraced beneath the darkening sky. A wondrous world of woodland was this ancient Forest of Rotherhame, where great oaks, whose youth had known the Middle Ages, looked up with fatherly pride to the younger elms and beeches which had shot high above their heads, where deer held high revel in leafy fastnesses, where merry squirrels leaped in airy joy from spray to spray, where even birds of prey were suffered to live and die unmolested by the vulgar hatred of barbarian keepers, which would fain have gibbeted them with rats and stoats as ver-



min, and exposed their noble hearts in inglorious decay.

Far before the travellers, gleaming in the imperfect light, lay the road they had to traverse, a white lone way, leading onwards through wilds of heathy moorland, which rose and fell in long waves far as the eye could reach, or here and there sank abruptly into deep pits. Down in the damp and reedy bottoms of these haunts of the jack-o'-lantern and the hawk, grew clumps of sturdy hollies, whose clusters of burnished berries relieved the dull and livid aspect of the scene, although the blackness of the hour was fast absorbing into itself even these pin points of vivid colour. Far different is the heath on a sweet summer evening, when the air is laden with thyme and honey, and the rich light lingers lovingly on purple blooms and golden gorse. But Winter has his glories too, and brings cold jewels of ice and hoar frost to hang about denuded stalks and withered fern.

The after-glow had died away and a cool, ethereal crystal was succeeding in the west. And now, close beneath their road, yet somehow wrapped in a mysterious solitude which seemed to shut it out from the surrounding landscape, Geraldine noticed a sullen, rushy pool, guarded by a thin screen of scraggy trees. They stood round it like ghostly watchers, waving their skeleton arms against the freezing sky, while, below, the red soil tinged its waters with a hue almost of blood.

There was no sight or sound of life about this pool, no belated robin on the twigs, nor wild duck swimming on its discoloured surface. Only the night wind whistled through the hollies and hissed over the heather, scattering the last sere leaves, and in the pauses between each blast a monotonous shiver of rushes became audible, seeming faintly to whisper some ghastly secret to the waste.

"That is Culpepper's Bowl, the scene of poor Mr. Weedon's murder, which five years ago made such a sensation in the country," said the Archdeacon, starting up excitedly as he drove past.

The two girls looked out eagerly, and strained their eyes into the gathering darkness.

"Oh, papa," cried Geraldine, "I remember so well your telling us all about it one autumn evening as we came home from a long walk, and I dreamt all night of the murdered man's face, lying stiff and white beneath the cold waters."

"We were staying here a few months after it happened," said Mrs. Egerton. "Poor Mrs. Bogle drove me one day to see the spot, and told me many interesting details, and how the whole affair had so shaken her nerves that she had never ventured to wander about alone since."

"The poor little child who was hiding in the fern," said Geraldine, pityingly. "I wonder what has become of her!"

"She is still living, I believe," answered the Archdeacon, "in the charge of her relations. Bogle told me that Lady Rotherhame had very kindly given a large sum of money for her education. Poor Weedon was the son of her confidential servant, you know."

"I am convinced," remarked Miss Nutting, "that such instances of noble liberality are due to the influence of the Catholic revival. Before the institution of the weekly offertory, people never seemed to look on giving as an essential part of Christian duty!"

"I fear from what I hear of poor Lady Rotherhame, that she was but little influenced by religious principle of any kind. But in this instance she seems to have behaved better than could have been expected. Bogle gave me a most harrowing account of what he had himself witnessed while the body was being exposed for identification. There it was, he said, resting on a table in the miserable parlour of the public-house, terrible marks of blows about the face, the clothes soaked, and the fine tall figure unstraightened. There were men drinking and women gossiping in the room outside, and the little child rolled up asleep in the landlady's armchair. In the midst of all came in an old woman to view the body—a dear, faithful old soul who had served the Harold family all her life, and who begged hard for admittance, feeling no doubt an anxiety which she dared not put into words."

"Was this the mother?" asked Geraldine quickly.

"Yes, poor soul, it was! She was the first person who recognised him, for he had enlisted and left the place when a boy, and had deserted from the army, so that he had never dared show his face at home. His mother had gone on all these years hoping against hope for tidings of him, until at last, about a fortnight before the murder he had come to pay her a surreptitious visit, under an assumed name. She had kept his secret faithfully, knowing that he would be arrested if discovered, and it appeared afterwards that the Countess, her mistress, was the single person to whom she had ventured to confide it."

"What *did* she do when she found that it was he who had been murdered?"

"Oh, it was a dreadful business. She stopped a moment as though she hardly dared lift the corner of the sheet. Then, as her eyes fell on the face, she threw up her poor old withered arms above her head, screamed out, 'Oh, my boy, my Charley!' and fell in a fit upon the ground. The only thing they could do to soothe her when she came to herself, was to bring the child to her, and lay it in her lap, and Bogle said it was the most touching sight to see her tottering homewards, the little one clinging to her skirts. But as time passed on, the sight of it seemed to be more than she could bear, and

then Lady Rotherhame had it sent from her away to school."

As the Archdeacon finished speaking, the smooth roll of the wheels on the carriage-drive of Rotherhame Rectory warned the travellers that their journey was at an end. The dark shade of the forest was left behind, and, at a short distance, they could see, by the pale steely light of the newly-risen moon, the square outline of an ivied church tower, bathed in the white mist of the fine December evening.

## CHAPTER II.

A spiritual Pindar !  
Who looks on erring souls as straying pigs,  
That must be lashed by law wherever found,  
And driven to church as to the parish pound.  
With sweet kind natures, as in honied cells,  
Religion lives, and feels herself at home.

Hood.

THE Egerton party had scarcely time to observe the aspect of the house, a pretty, gabled edifice, built in somewhat ecclesiastical style, when the door opened, a cheery blaze of light poured out upon the road, and a sallow maiden, of dowdy appearance, became visible on the threshold.

"Oh, dear Geraldine and Gertrude," she cried, in tones of unfeigned welcome. "How jolly it is to have you here at last! Come in, do. Ellen is longing to see you, but she has a cold and cannot"—

Here a sudden thrust from the rear interrupted her flow of greeting, and a voice, intended to be inaudible to the visitors, was heard to mutter crossly:

"What are you thinking of, Mary, sticking yourself in my way like that? Can't you suppose that I must be naturally desirous to give the first welcome to my friend the Archdeacon?"

Then in a higher key—

"How d'ye do, how d'ye do, Egerton?"

De—lighted to see you ! ” and, with a somewhat rude disregard of the four ladies, the speaker drew his clerical brother into the hall.

Dr. Bogle was a tall muscular person of between fifty and sixty, and was, at first sight, not prepossessing. A pair of greenish grey eyes looked out with a rather hard stare from under bushy brows, the coarse grizzled beard had a bristling, formidable look, as though each separate hair could inflict a puncture, the lower jaw was too heavy for the face, and the Doctor's strong, stubborn intellect, on which he valued himself not a little, exhibited itself in lumps of various shapes and sizes upon his low square brow. When he opened his lips, a set of large prominent white teeth came to view —teeth, which, however admirable from a dentist's point of view, had a greedy, snapping look, which made unprofessional persons feel a little nervous.

The manner in which his host, to the total exclusion of the ladies, confined his attentions to himself, shocked the well-bred instincts of the Archdeacon, and he was withdrawing himself a little coldly from Dr. Bogle's affectionate familiarities, when the peculiar warmth of his wife's greeting recalled him to a sense of the sound views and recent bereavement of his host.

“ Ah, my dear Doctor,” exclaimed Mrs. Egerton, pressing forwards, and retaining his big hand in both her own, “ how pleased I

am to be with you once more ! and so glad too," she added, lowering her voice and glancing expressively towards his daughters, "to see those dear pictures of her that is gone. Oh, how *she* would have welcomed us to-day ! She always made such a friend of me, you know, and used to say that she could tell me anything, poor dear thing."

"Umph, yes ! Well, come in out of the draught," responded the mourner, ungraciously withdrawing his hand. "You must put your best leg forward, please, Mrs. Egerton, for we have a few friends coming to dine with us to-night—my curate, Herbert Meules, his mother and sister, and Captain Browel. They want to hear you perform on the guitar, so I hope you are prepared to give them a good entertainment, for 't isn't often we get any one about here who can boast so unusual an accomplishment. Folks think a great deal of your playing, I'm told, up there in Winstan diocese, more especially in your husband's own archdeaconry, eh ? ha, ha, ha !"

He placed a lighted candle in her hand, and chuckling inwardly at his own wit, desired his daughters to show the ladies to their rooms. There the process of unpacking and dressing for dinner was carried forward rather painfully by the cold and weary travellers, for, except in Mrs. Egerton's apartment, where a few coals smoked dismally, none of the party were granted the cheery welcome of a fire.



Ellen and Mary Bogle, aged respectively fifteen and sixteen years, were not allowed much space for conversation in their young guests' bedroom, a rule having been devised by their surviving parent that they were always to be ready in the drawing-room at least ten minutes before the ringing of the dinner bell. They hastily attired themselves in their choicest evening costume, white alpaca frocks, spotted with blue, narrow-chested, and very little trimmed, for though Dr. Bogle might otherwise have connived at a respectful following of the fashion, Lord Rotherhame, his patron, was supposed to approve simplicity in the daughters of clergymen.

Dr. Bogle was a bully, but he was also something of a sycophant, and although, in vindication of his priestly character, he could occasionally assume a tone of blustering authority towards his noble parishioner, he would rather have cut off his right hand than seriously offend his prejudices.

To his Bishop, to women, to the aged and the weak, the Doctor was loud, dictatorial, terrible, to "the Earl" he was all humility and deference. A man of a certain kind of talent, though of plebeian origin and manners, and possessing the blunt perceptions which proceed from toughness of heart, he owed his present rich living to his father's connection with the Harold family, which he had served

in the capacity of librarian and house-steward, and, from the moment that he took possession of his rectory, he asserted for himself a prominent position in the ecclesiastical world of Westshire, flooding the local papers with burning articles on the questions of the day, and rendering every cause he espoused obnoxious by the acrimony with which he advocated it. Besides these public labours, the good Doctor prided himself on discharging his parochial duties with a zeal above the average.

A difference of opinion on a question of theology was, by his stamping-out policy, treated as a crime, which brought down on the delinquent an avalanche of controversial dogmatism, of which it might truly be affirmed "that the penalty exceeded the offence," and the thinnest ghost of a scandal that arose in the village was, by his unflagging energy in tracking out, investigation, and reprimand, nursed into a substance and vitality which it might otherwise never have attained.

Assisted by Lord Rotherhame, who generally judged it right to stand by his parish priest in all parochial disputes, he managed before long to convert his people at least to outward subserviency, and it was soon understood that peace and charitable aid were only to be enjoyed by those who kept on good terms with both the spiritual and temporal authorities of the place. The

possession of the wealthiest peer in Westshire, as his parishioner was, however, the tallest feather in Dr. Bogle's cap.

Lord Rotherhame was his nearest neighbour, the Doctor benefited constantly by his profuse liberality, their wives had died in the same year, and Lord Rotherhame had answered for the three eldest Boggles at the font. Drawn together by so many common ties, Dr. Bogle felt himself justified in believing that they were intimate friends, and never wearied of proclaiming the fact.

The place of his departed wife had been taken in the family by her sister, Alice Barnes, a good-natured, rosy-cheeked girl of twenty-six or twenty-seven. Robert, the eldest son, who greatly resembled his father, was the idol of the domestic circle, and was at present a student at Queen's College, Oxford.

Below him came the timid and oppressed girls, Mary Philippa and Ellen Rotherhame, and youngest of all were Bluebell and Percy, two pretty little children. The family party was completed by Miss Bartholomew, the governess, a sallow young woman, marked with small-pox and a severe student of the Early Fathers.

The dressing bell had sounded some twenty minutes, when Mary and Ellen, dutifully mindful of the parental injunctions, made their entry into the drawing-room, and, craning their necks round to notice the set of

their skirts, seated themselves primly on the sofa, prepared to receive their company.

They had not long to wait, for Nina Nutting, in an agony lest she should be behind time, soon tapped at the door, and came in with a blush, and an apology prepared for the occasion.

She was dressed in a light silk skirt which had long seen its best days, a white muslin transparent bodice, and the invariable cheap cross. Miss Nutting's cross was a kind of walking advertisement of her views on doctrine, and had often wrung the hearts of four evangelical sisters belonging to as many denominations of Christians. But Nina declared herself ready to bear persecution for the truth's sake, and so she continued to wear the cross.

She was relieved to find no one more formidable in the drawing-room than the two young girls. Feeling, however, that they shone with a lustre reflected from their father, who, owing to his cuttingly pugnacious articles in her favourite *Earnest Churchwoman*, she regarded as a kind of ecclesiastical Duke of Wellington, she was prepared to greet Ellen and Mary with a species of tempered adulation.

"Come, dear old Mary," she exclaimed, in a confidential whisper, and dropping down with childlike naïveté on a rug before the fire, "let's have a cosy chat! Is that your sister Ellie? Well, she's exactly like you,

to be sure, and you both have a look of your *dear* Papa. What a noble man he is, Mary! how intensely privileged you are in having such a father!"

"Ye-es," agreed poor Mary, without much animation.

Miss Nutting had stated a fact it were heresy to doubt, but Mary's faith in it sprang rather from the head than from the heart.

"We don't see very much of Papa," she added, "he is generally so busy in his study or the parish."

"Oh yes," responded Nina, in an awe-struck murmur. "What a high honour, love, we ought to think it when we are allowed to help our priests in any way, however humble. It is, of course, very little we *can* do, and even about that little my naughty heart often makes me feel nervous and lazy; but the Archdeacon is always so very, very good and loving, and then it is so delightful when he lets me collect the chink-a-chink for him, and sometimes—sometimes—on Sundays—I am allowed to make up the bouquets for the altar."

"Dear me, Miss Nutting, I fear I am sometimes presumptuous enough to do that without waiting for *leave*," exclaimed the merry mocking voice of Geraldine, who, with her father, had entered at the moment. "Papa wouldn't thank me to be always coming to him for permission to stick a few geraniums into a vase."

Miss Nutting looked both wounded and perplexed by her pupil's uncivil sarcasm, but the Archdeacon came to her rescue, saying seriously—

“No, Geraldine, no. Miss Nutting is perfectly right in counting it a high privilege when God, from whom all honour comes, suffers us to draw near to Him to present the beautiful flowers that He has made as an offering of love upon His altar. You should not speak so irreverently, my child!”

Geraldine, who was generally allowed to do and say pretty much what she pleased, knew nevertheless that even her license had its limits, and she never ventured on a retort when her father adopted this grave tone. So, blushing a conscience-stricken blush, she muttered an inaudible defence, while Nina, transported with gratitude for his support, made a violent raid upon the Archdeacon, and dragging him from the fire, at which, after the pleasant fashion of gentlemen he was about to warm his back, insisted upon forcing him into an easy chair, too low for a man of his height to occupy with comfort.

He submitted after a few ineffectual remonstrances, knowing by experience that gentle and timid as Nina seemed there were occasions when she could be firm. Alarmed at his own importance, he gladly greeted deliverance in the advent of his better-half. In she came, bringing with her warmth and

sunshine into the cold stiff room, and holding out kind motherly hands to the shy awkward girls, whom she summoned to sit on either side of her upon the sofa, and whose reserve began immediately to thaw beneath her genial flow of inquiry and recital.

Mrs. Egerton was the least difficult person in the world to get on with, she had a flattering habit of asking her friends for advice which she never dreamt of taking, was frankly confidential with every one she met, and full of unconscious humour which imparted salt and naïveté to her remarks.

Logic was decidedly not her forte, and she was miserable when brought to book, and asked to give reasons for her opinions. But with all this inconsequence, her intuition generally led her straight to right conclusions which more powerful brains attained only through a laborious process of elaborate calculation, and despite a tendency to err on the side of charity, it was not often that Mrs. Egerton was found to have made mistakes in her judgments of character.

None came into contact with her fresh and joyous nature without feeling the better for it, and, encouraged so far as even to originate a few remarks, Ellen and Mary felt quite regretful when new arrivals robbed them of their friend's protection, and stood gazing fondly on her from behind the table, till at the stroke of seven the parlourmaid announced

that dinner was served, and the whole party adjourned to the dining-room.

The dinner was well cooked, and the maid and gardener waited creditably, but once or twice they made a blunder, and then Dr. Bogle and his son Robert, a heavy-looking youth with a sprouting beard, looked terrible. The conversation turned a good deal upon ecclesiastical topics—the latest episcopal appointment, the revival of Church feeling in the country, and the difficulties to be encountered from evangelical hostility. The only discordant element in the party was Captain Browel, agent for the Rotherhame estates, who was a Puritan of a controversial type, but even he quailed before the biting sneers of the Doctor and the overwhelming assertions of the dignitary. Mrs. Egerton chimed in with approving sighs and sympathetic cooing exclamations whenever occasion offered; Nina aided by her reverent and appreciative silence; Miss Bartholomew by well-timed platitudes. The Archdeacon thought the latter lady a remarkably sensible young person; Mr. Meules, the curate, echoed each sentiment she uttered after his feebler fashion, and even Dr. Bogle did not always drown her voice. So it was not unnatural that Miss Nutting, whose humble graces did not command such open recognition, should feel herself a little jealous and aggrieved. Robert Bogle thought all this Church talk very “slow and shoppy,” and he tried hard



to establish a laboured flirtation with Geraldine, talked loud about theatres, horse-racing, gambling tables, and everything else likely to scandalise his elders' prejudices, dated each event by different county balls, and rudely silenced his sisters whenever they attempted to mingle in the conversation. Robert had always plenty of broad, clumsy compliments at command for those young ladies who were either fast, pretty, or members of county families, but for the antiquated folly which reverences women as women he felt a sovereign scorn—he despised the poor, the ugly, and the unfashionable. Ellen and Mary submitted quietly to his sway—Robert was a hero to them.

"You must come and look round my church to-morrow," observed Dr. Bogle to Mrs. Egerton, "you will say that it has made a great stride since you were here. There is still a small debt upon the tower repairs, but your husband will get us an offertory on Christmas Day which will go far towards clearing that off."

"*Our* church is looking very nice too," returned Mrs. Egerton, "though, of course, not to compare with yours. I am so glad that"—

"*Our* church!" interrupted the Doctor, with a roar of laughter. "Well, Egerton, what do you think of that? Here's your good lady talking about '*our* church!' Why when did you take holy orders, ma'am?"

"Take care, Mrs. Egerton, take care! You'll get the name of Mrs. Proudie yet, you will!" And the Doctor laughed again.

Mrs. Egerton coloured, and answered rather indignantly—

"Yes, *our* church, Dr. Bogle, I repeat it! I have yet to learn that the Church is the property of any human being, and in its use it is equally designed for all baptised persons."

"Well, I've got a Rowland for my Oliver, that's certain, Mrs. Egerton. But talking of South Grantham Church, one can't wonder that it's not so well restored as mine, for it isn't every one that has such a good lay helper as I have in my friend, Lord Rotherhame. The sums that good man spends in charity are something stupendous. 'Tis not that he will only give when he can see his name at the head of a subscription list, like our evangelical friends—excuse me, Browel!—but he will put in his fifties at the offertory, and privately, you know, he has defrayed the whole expense of endowing the new parish at St. Dunstan's. It was a heavy business that, but I told him it was his plain duty."

"Splendid!" cried the Archdeacon, greatly impressed, "that is making a good use of your influence. What sort of man is Lord Rotherhame, Bogle? I have only met him once at one of the annual 'Prevention of Cruelty' meetings, and then he struck me as being rather cold and unapproachable."

"Oh, but that's only on the surface! With his intimate friends—with me now for instance—he is affectionate and simple as a child. Oh, he's a dear fellow, is Rotherhame! But he's not fond of meetings, you have him at a disadvantage there. The 'Prevention of Cruelty' is pretty near the only one he can be got to attend in the course of the whole year."

Dr. Bogle sighed heavily. It was the business of his life to allure his patron to the platforms of protest and indignation-meetings, and in this respect he was forced to admit himself that his life had been a failure.

"By the way, Robert," he continued, "talking of Lord Rotherhame reminds me that I was up at the Castle to-day, and Mrs. Walters tells me that your friend Berkeley is coming home on Tuesday. Very nice for Robert," he added, turning to Mrs. Egerton, "to have a friend close upon his own age living so near. He and young Berkeley have been intimate from babyhood, I may say."

"And so the schoolboy intimacy will ripen into a college friendship," said Mrs. Egerton. "And what sort of a boy is this young Lord Berkeley? A nice, well brought up lad?"

"I wish I could tell you he was worthy of his good father," replied the Doctor, "but he has a deal of haughtiness of manner, I am sorry to say, and is very head-strong and

self-willed. Rotherhame errs on the side of gentleness, though I'm sure if he could only see the airs that youngster puts on behind his back he would look a little more sharply after him. But as long as he believes that Berkeley is more taken up with him than with anybody else he is satisfied and inquires no further—a monstrous mistake that in dealing with young people! A good parent should have eyes in the back of his head, and take nothing for granted.”

“Ah, I can quite imagine what he is like. One of those silly fellows who thinks himself a man before his time, seems bored with everything, and turns up his nose at the good old ways of his elders. I know the sort of thing.”

“A thorough Rehoboam, in fact,” suggested the Archdeacon, putting a finishing touch to his wife's portrait of the unknown offender.

“Oh, I don't say that,” said the Doctor in a qualifying tone, “but Berkeley certainly knows how to come round his father. There's much that is unsatisfactory about him.”

“Does the Earl expect to be quite alone at the Castle this Christmas?” enquired Miss Barnes of her brother-in-law.

“Yes, it doesn't seem as if he would ever keep open house again,” and turning to the Archdeacon the Doctor added: “He makes a regular hermitage of that great house of his, and it don't add to his popularity in the

county, as you may imagine. I wish I could persuade him to come a little out of his shell; but having all of us so handy, he thinks, I suppose, he may go furthur and fare worse."

At this moment the noise of a merry peal of bells, ringing in the frosty evening air, penetrated the thick curtains and shutters.

"Hullo! talk of the devil, &c.!" cried the Doctor facetiously, "that must be his lordship, I declare. They always ring a peal when he comes down," he added in an explanatory tone to Mrs. Egerton.

"Don't you think," inquired the Reverend Herbert Meules, a young man of lean and rather sanctimonious appearance, with a weak mouth and long thin neck, "that it is just a little profane, Dr. Bogle, to use the consecrated bells for such a purpose? What is Lord Rotherhame more than any other lay person? In the eye of the Church of no greater consequence than poor old Sally Tibbetts."

This was a home thrust, but his Rector replied severely—

"I only wish that all the priests in our communion were half as well instructed Churchmen as Lord Rotherhame, Meules. Alice, my dear, perhaps the ladies would wish to adjourn."

## CHAPTER III.

Here they lie, had realms and lands,  
Who now want strength to stir their hands,  
Where from their pulpits sealed with dust,  
They preach, "In greatness is no trust!"

F. BEAUMONT.

PEOPLE are ordinarily supposed to like their contrasts, and perhaps it was for some such reason that Dr. Bogle courted Archdeacon Egerton's society. The Archdeacon was like himself a staunch High Churchman, but there the resemblance between them ceased. The Archdeacon, albeit a pugnacious partisan of all wronged and oppressed persons and parties, was a man of broad charity and generous belief.

Descended of a good old English stock, he was vehemently patriotic, and in spite of a natural disposition to "discover the soul of goodness in things evil," could never be brought to extend his kindly toleration to British Radicals, whom he regarded as the spiritual descendants of Esau and Judas. But, sweeping as were his general condemnations, he uniformly made an exception in favour of any individual with whom he was brought into personal contact. The unknown majority he vaguely included in a damnation comprehensive as that to which a certain type of unimaginative Christians

her. Along the blooming path of life, in the distance radiant with sunshine and sparkling waters, lie hidden subtle poisons, thorns which, through the feet, have power to pierce the heart, weary disillusions, chill sicknesses, under whose fell influence the untried strength of confident hope dies quite away, and the pilgrim who started in the morning vigorous and fresh, comes at night-fall maimed and battered to his journey's end. Comfort there lies, however, mixed in the chalice of this bitter truth. The pilgrim sleeps, and wakes refreshed,—bathes in the Death-waters which regenerate. Amid the falling leaves new buds already form themselves, and from the ashes of the purifying fires rises phoenix-like a young indestructible being, child of the old self, heir of its acquired wealth of obedience, patience, love, and of the fadeless glory of its hard-won victories.

It was a grey breezy morning, and ready dressed, Geraldine stood at her window, listening to the cawing of the rooks which swung to and fro in their airy berths on the tall forest trees, and gazing with wistful intentness up the lofty flight of moss-grown steps, which on the further side of the Rectory lane rose steeply through a maze of waving boughs. At its summit, looming through the morning mist, were the grey towers of what looked like an enchanted wizard-castle, and at its base two enormous leopards, with up-

lifted tails and open jaws, seemed to menace all rash intrusion within their magic precincts. It was like a vision of Jacob's ladder lost among the clouds, and Geraldine wished that she had been an angel to climb it and penetrate the wonder-world above. The deep boom of a clock from the highest tower, telling the hour of eight, broke upon her reverie, and at the same moment the sharp tingle of Dr. Bogle's breakfast bell warned her to delay her descent no longer.

"Five minutes after time! Why can't you be down by the stroke of the clock?" inquired Dr. Bogle of Mary, who timidly entered the room behind Geraldine, fastening the last button of her apron with benumbed helpless fingers. "Good-morning, Geraldine, I can understand your not being exactly punctual after your journey yesterday, but I have no doubt Pa keeps better hours with you at home."

Here Miss Bartholomew entered with Ellen.

"I must apologise for Ellen's late appearance, Dr. Bogle," she observed, in low mysterious accents, "I detained her for a few minutes in my own room."

"Indeed! nothing wrong I hope?" said the Doctor.

"N—no," explained Miss Bartholomew, "I thought her in fault, but she succeeded in giving me a satisfactory explanation. Miss Barnes wishes me to make tea, as she is in



bed with a headache. *Good morning, Miss Nutting.*"

"Oh, I am *so* sorry," faltered Nina, approaching the autocrat with palpable trepidation, "but my naughty little watch stopped. I never knew it play me such a trick before!"

The Doctor glared incredulity.

"Well, well, we're a punctual household, Miss Nutting, so we had best lose no more time, but begin our breakfast. Service is at nine, and we should secure a season for private reflection first—not stuff ourselves with food till the last moment and then rush into church. Mind that, Mary." And ranging themselves round the table the ladies bent forward while the Doctor said grace.

Dr. Bogle and Miss Bartholomew managed to keep the conversation pretty well to themselves, and found their parochial discussions so engrossing that when Nina, longing to secure admission into their clique, hazarded an occasional interested question, she could scarcely obtain an answer, and as they spoke of things and persons of which she could know nothing, she was at last forced to abandon her attempts in despair. An atmosphere of repression reigned around, and it was a relief to the visitors when Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton entered—serene, cheerful, and sublimely unconscious that they had committed the enormity of coming down twenty minutes after time.

Their advent made conversation more general, and Ellen, gathering courage, began to murmur in Geraldine's ear interesting particulars concerning the "family" at the Castle, their sayings and doings, till at last the privileged Robert, strolling in towards the close of the meal, overheard her as he heaped up cold meat on his plate at the sideboard, and denounced her talk as "beastly snobbish."

Breakfast at last concluded, the Doctor returned thanks in a rasping metallic voice for the unappetising mercies of salt butter and Australian mutton, and the party dispersed to meet again in their walking-dresses a few minutes before the commencement of morning prayers.

Led by Miss Barnes, who had by this time appeared, the ladies bent their way churchwards across a corner of the forest, leaving the clergymen to take an official short cut to the vestry.

The Doctor paused to point out to his friend the beauty of the lych-gate, the elaborate tooth-work of the deep Norman portal, and the high antiquity of the warm-tinted tower.

"Tis but seldom you see an old church like this properly restored and adapted for the Catholic ritual," he said. "Come in and view the interior. It's catch-cold work standing about in the graveyard this weather."

"Yet how calmly beautiful is the scene,"

said the Archdeacon, lingering fondly. "How different from the weedy, neglected churchyards that have so long disgraced our parishes, nettles and rank grass covering the precious dust which shall arise 'When all that are in the graves shall hear His Voice.' Here, as though it were the eve of the Advent Day, the finishing touches have been laid with reverent care, and all lies waiting in the hush of serene anticipation for the sounding of the Archangel's trump. What a stirring, then, amid these ancient graves. Alas! that many must rise to shame and everlasting contempt!"

"Ah! that's right, Egerton. It's refreshing to find some of the old school left in these sentimental days, who are not ashamed to confess they believe in a hell for the ungodly. You don't go in then for those impious new-fashioned universalistic notions that are so much in vogue," and the Doctor rubbed his hands.

He was one of that class to whom a salvation shared with the tag-rag-and-bobtail of society seem little worth having, and who like to maintain a character of exclusiveness about that heaven to which such important personages as themselves look forward to belong.

"I really hardly know what to think," returned the Archdeacon, thoughtfully. "Our religion teaches us that there is no limit to the Love of God, and certainly, if

so, it is not for us to invent one. I like to see that, Bogle," he continued, lingering by a grave beneath the east window, decked even in this winter season with rare white blossoms. "What a celestial freshness there is about these petals, almost as if an angel had brought them straight from the Heavenly Garden."

"Ah! they are fitting memorials of the sweet woman who rests beneath," returned the Doctor, drawing near and pointing to the marble cross, whose base bore the name of "Mary Philippa, wife of Kenelm Harold."

"Yes, poor soul," and a touch of real sentiment might have been heard in his tone as memory flashed across him a vision of the graceful form and small flower-like face of the young Countess of Rotherhame. "Yes, she was a saint-like person, and did a mint of good. The neighbourhood is full of the memorials of her charity; the memory of the just is blessed indeed! Lord Rotherhame was simply wrapped up in her, and there are not many evenings when, if you pass by the churchyard, you do not see him standing or kneeling by this grave."

"Is that Lady Rotherhame's grave then?" asked the Archdeacon, pointing with some wonder at the simple inscription.

"Ah! I don't wonder at your being surprised; every body is. No, he wouldn't have his wife's rank mentioned on her monument. Why, I'm sure I can't tell you, but certainly

not from any want of respect ; he well nigh worshipped that woman ! I suppose it must have been some sort of fanciful scruple about avoiding parade in death."

" Ah ! " said the Archdeacon approvingly, " no doubt he feels with the poet :—

Can storied urn or animated bust,  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath ?  
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust,  
Or flattery soothe the dull, cold ear of death ? "

" True enough," said the Doctor. " He has followed the same fancy, you will find, with the inscription in the church on his mother's monument."

" Your mutual sorrow, my dear Bogle," said the Archdeacon in a lowered voice, " must have brought you very near together."

" Indeed it has," returned the Doctor, though not in the most confident of tones ; " but come on, Egerton, we must be getting into the vestry, for we are punctual bodies here, and I begin the service at the stroke of nine, whether my congregation has arrived or not."

The two clergymen passed in under the deep shadow-haunted portal, and entered a church which, spite of the restoration it had been undergoing for two years or more, maintained a strangely quaint and old-world aspect. Correct uniformity has long been laying its levelling hand on our old English churches, and when archdeacons and bishops

triumphantly enumerate in visitation charges the round numbers of those lately restored and rebuilt within their jurisdiction, the hearer may be pardoned a fond, regretful sigh.

For side by side with the little ecclesiastical edifice, with its spireless roof, thin walls, decent rows of stained deal seats, weak harmonium, and unvarying propriety of chancel arrangement, rises before the mind another picture—a time-hallowed building, in the crumbling fissures of whose old tower the matted ivy feeds, whose grey roof is overgrown with lichen, the irregularities of whose flooring are marked by the rise and fall of the pews—pews facing all directions, on whose dusty oaken shelves Bibles with apocryphas and s's like f's are food for worms and moths.

There rises the memory of the Lion and the Unicorn, whose significance was a sacred mystery to our young imaginations, and as one stands on the levelled and orderly churchyard the eye yearns wistfully for the grassy mounds and sunken headstones of by-gone days.

Happily the restorer of Rotherhame Church had a compassionate tenderness for the weakness even of those that had gone before him, and so it fell, much to the dissatisfaction of the Rector, who had hoped to make a clean sweep of all antiquated abuses, that the quaint oak pews were left untouched,

and even the shabby gallery, where the village band had fiddled in his childish days, was permitted by Lord Rotherhame to live on in its accustomed haunt among the spiders at the west end. Stucco and white-wash had, however, been remorselessly swept away, the rood screen had been freshly painted, and from its fanciful carvings looked forth unknown male and female saints—their pale passionless faces peering out from under solid gilded aureoles.

The painted wooden clock, which had not gone for more than two hundred years, had taken a fresh lease of life, and apostles began, with energy renewed by their long rest, to tell the hours and quarters. Old glass, rich and of priceless value, filled the windows, and the Bible on the reading desk, which still—alas for Dr. Bogle!—faced west, was thickly studded with jewels.

Lingering beneath the Norman arches among the solemn pillars with their heathenish zig-zag ornamentation, or standing beside the stone effigies of dames and crusaders whose impassive features seemed to say that for long ages the wild storms of grief and passion had ceased to surge within their breasts, one might have fancied oneself in a spot secure from the inroads of changeful fortune, had not puffy-faced cherubs, with trumpets in their mouths, perpetually impressed upon the memory that a day was coming when the mouldering dead should rise from dusty beds,

Church and World fall to pieces, the "old order change and give place to new."

When prayers were over, the Doctor led his guests into all the odd, dark corners and little chapels of sepulture in which his church abounded, and down into a cold gloomy crypt, where by a lantern's light they saw a green painted box—the great boast of the parish—which contained the mouldy dust of Ealred, King of Wessex.

The Archdeacon was in the seventh heaven, and so engrossed by the gratification his archæological tastes were receiving as to hear but little of the Doctor's lamentations over the unsatisfactory want of thoroughness which characterised the restoration of his sanctuary.

"Rotherhame is a peculiar fellow, there's no denying it!" he said, "full of quips and cranks, one who will do things after his own fancy and suffer no one to turn him. Now the quarter of what he's spent on wood carving and decorations, which are hardly seen, and which no one's the better for, would have swept away that rotten, Dissenting-looking gallery, and a few of those jewels in the vessels would have paid for a new set of open seats and the removal of this disreputable floor. But, no! he won't hear of having them touched, and again sticks to keeping that great pew on pillars to sit in, instead of aiding me to remove all distinction of persons by sitting quietly among the congregation.



It's not pride, and it's not parsimony, but simply that he hates change, and likes to keep things as they were in his forefathers' days."

Meanwhile Miss Barnes was regaling Mrs. Egerton, who had a morbid interest in monuments, with little sketches of the persons they commemorated. The white tablets that enumerated the virtues of past parsons and churchwardens were soon disposed of, and Miss Barnes hurried on into the north transept, where they were environed by hatchments and memorials of the Harold family, whose burial vault was directly beneath their feet.

"That is a curious specimen of a tomb, Mrs. Egerton," she said, cheerily, doing the honours of the kingdom of death, and pointing out a large monument on which was the recumbent figure of a peer in robes and ruff, with a goodly number of diminishing sons and daughters kneeling one behind the other at his feet. "There lies the Red Lord Berkeley, who was hanged in St. Dunstan's market place for harbouring Jesuit priests, and whose children may well pray for him, for if ever any one needed prayers it was he, poor man ! Those clusters of leopards' heads at each corner are familiar objects to us ; the ' White Leopard ' is the Harold crest, and in olden times they were always having them carved all over the place. You will see some exactly like these at the Castle when

you go there ; the Red Lord himself designed this monument, and had it made in his lifetime, they say. Now this brass, you will see, bears the name of the present Earl's mother, and he would have the first words of the 'Miserere' put beneath—so odd ! for whatever our relations' faults may be, one usually *appears* at all events to forget them when they are gone. One does not like to speak evil of the departed, but she was certainly anything but a good woman, and my brother-in-law says that her death bed must have been a most painful one to stand by."

"The Doctor visited and ministered to her, I suppose ?" inquired Mrs. Egerton.

"No, indeed ! She would suffer no clergyman to come near her, and the servants said her shrieks and ravings were frightful to hear. She seemed to have no sort of real repentance, poor creature, though an excessive dread of death, and I was told she died screaming.

"My love, what a fearful description ! But perhaps her mind was wandering, and the poor creature would not be accountable for what she did. Dear me ! what an overpowering mass of marble. Who can have been remarkable enough to have merited such a bulky recognition ? 'The Honourable Simon Harold'—who was he, Miss Barnes ?"

"That was the uncle of the present Earl," returned Miss Barnes. "He was drowned off the coast of Africa. Do you know, that poor

boy's was such a sad story ! He was very much of Lord Rotherhame's type of character naturally, I should imagine. People always talked of him as if he were a hopeless reprobate, but I daresay, if he had been more kindly treated, he would not have turned out so badly after all."

"What did he do, poor fellow, anything very dreadful?"

"Well, no—he ran away from home, you know, when he was about fifteen. He had been unfortunate from his birth, everything seems to have gone against him. His father had married a second time—the daughter of a farmer in the neighbourhood, the best and most amiable of women—but naturally the marriage gave desperate offence to the elder children, and from the time poor Simon was born they seem to have conceived something like a hatred for him. As long as his mother, whom he loved devotedly, lived, he was not without a protector, but when he was about twelve years old she died, and then all his worst troubles began. His brothers and sisters regularly set upon him ; they snubbed, abused, and worse than all, by dint of constant misrepresentation, at last succeeded in turning even his father against him. I don't know exactly how it all came about, but between them they trumped up some horrid story, and made his father believe him guilty of something very mean and disgraceful. He was a proud, bad-tempered boy ; there was

a dreadful scene between him and his sister, Lady Cicely, he accused her of being a liar and a hypocrite, and she, in return, used grossly insulting language with regard to his mother. Then he seems to have lost all control over himself, he seized up a knife and flung it at her. It struck her on the breast, the wound was not dangerous, but it hurt her a good deal, and she and her other brothers were beside themselves with rage, and threatened him with a criminal prosecution. They carried the story directly to their father, and he was so angry that he refused even to see Simon or to hear his defence. Next day the poor boy was missing, and although instant search was made, they were unable to discover him. He had embarked for the Cape as cabin-boy in a merchant ship. The next thing that was heard of him was that the ship had gone to the bottom with every soul on board."

"Dear me, what a terribly sad story!" said Mrs. Egerton, looking up mournfully at the skulls and coats of arms which decorated the gigantic mass of marble. "What awful self-reproach that unnatural sister must have felt!"

"She was the Lady Rotherhame I was telling you about just now. Both her elder brothers died soon after the youngest ran away, so poor young Simon's drowning became the means of her succeeding to the title. There is her husband, Sir Kenelm Harold's

brass. He was of a younger branch of the same family, and was made a baronet for some military service in the East. I remember him slightly ; a very moody, melancholy man. The Earl is wonderfully like him, only brighter and more genial."

"Dr. Bogle told us," interrupted Geraldine, "that he has been down into the vault and seen the coffins of all these people. What a dismal family-party they must make. Their past life in the world must look to them now like the faint ray of a lamp seen at the end of a long black tunnel."

"If you are really going to be so amiable as to pay Mr. Meules a visit, dear Mrs. Egerton," said Miss Barnes, "I think we had better be making a move in that direction."

"Certainly, my love. He told me last night that he had an immense variety of illuminated scrolls and Alpine photographs to show me, and if we are to see them all and make a remark on each, we ought to begin at once. Which of you young ladies intends to be our companion?"

Miss Bartholomew, eagerly seconded by Nina Nutting, elected to follow Mrs. Egerton to the Curate's modest lodgings over the baker's shop, while the younger members of the party agreed to ascend the church-tower in a body under Robert Bogle's escort.

## CHAPTER IV.

Alas ! I have nor hope, nor health,  
Nor peace within nor calm around,  
Nor that content surpassing wealth  
The sage in meditation found,  
And walked with inward glory crowned—  
Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure,  
Others I see whom these surround—  
Smiling they live and call life pleasure—  
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

SHELLEY.

The moment that I saw you my heart leaped to your service.

SHAKESPEARE.

THERE is a time in a winter's day trying to the stoutest spirit, and that is the hour after luncheon. It is an essentially prosaic hour, five o'clock tea is very far distant, callers are possible, feet are cold, fires are black. One recoils from the idea of going out, yet conscience will not permit one to remain inactive.

Life, particularly when staying in other people's houses, becomes a burden, the imagination is at a low ebb, one is tempted to materialism. It was at such a season that Miss Bartholomew, with an air of solemn importance, came to Geraldine's rescue.

"Would you and your sister wish, Miss Egerton, to join our history class? We read every afternoon from two to three Dr. Nelson's 'History of the Sixteenth Century,' on orthodox principles! The sentiments are

quite such as your papa would approve ; pray bring your work ! ”

Geraldine willingly acceded, thankful to escape the otherwise inevitable infliction of a *tête-à-tête* with Robert.

“ And may I come too, dear Miss Bartholomew ? ” inquired little Nina, frisking impulsively forward to touch her sallow cheek. “ It will be so comfy to be all together ! Come on, old girls, ” and linking an unresponsive arm in each of hers, she triumphantly drew her pupils into the drawing-room, where Miss Bartholomew having yielded a chilling assent to her proposal, the whole party were speedily settled in a circle at a respectful distance from the fire.

Miss Bartholomew busied herself at the table with an illuminated scroll, and Nina produced a strip of sickly wool work, destined to be the fate of some reluctant victim at an approaching charity bazaar.

Her fingers stitched away nimbly, but her mind was less occupied with Dr. Nelson’s History, rendered in a monotonous tone by Mary, than with an envious contemplation of the superior discipline maintained by Miss Bartholomew. Ever since they had been first presented to one another Miss Nutting had felt, or been made to feel, a painful sense of inferiority to her more strong-minded sister governess.

Last night Miss Bartholomew had been hearkened to by the clergy, her opinion on

theological questions even having been pointedly sought, to-day she was respectfully obeyed by her pupils. Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton had ever been wont to look upon themselves as strict disciplinarians, and wherever Mrs. Egerton had visited *without* her daughters she had been able to promulgate her pet theory among credulous friends, who were wont accordingly to hold up the children of South Grantham Rectory as models to their own.

Hitherto Nina had shared in the delusion, but to-day she woke as from a dream. In violent contrast with the correct answers and hushed tones of the Misses Bogle, she seemed to hear the careless mistakes and irrepressible witticisms of the Egertons, and worse than all the loud "Oh, bother!" with which they were wont to receive her strictures upon their "naughty hearts," a phrase against which they waged especial warfare. But—darkest thought of all—the consumptive-looking curate, whose fading charms had gone to Nina's heart of hearts, had eyes for no one else when Miss Bartholomew was present.

In his lodgings this morning it was *she* who had stood upon his left hand when he showed his photographs, *her* advice that he had asked as to the position in which his new chromos should be suspended, and afterwards, when having pressed his apostolic hand, the ladies had followed one another out of his



dingy-looking sanctum, it was Miss Bartholomew who, with an air of initiation, had remained behind the others, and who afterwards had joined them out of breath at the school, every feature redolent of importance and conscious mystery.

What availed it that Nina was fifteen years the younger of the two, that her cheek was fair, and her manner coy and soft. Miss Bartholomew absorbed alike the curate's eyes and ears, and had Nina been Venus herself, he would have been left no leisure to admire or contemplate her.

Half an hour had been droned away in these bitter reflections, when the figure of a horseman, darkening the window, created a diversion, and Mary, dropping the book, cried out in tremulous accents—

“Oh, dear me, dear me, Miss Bartholomew. There's the Earl come to call! and papa gone out. I do trust he won't come in!”

Scarcely had she spoken when a light tap sounded on the door, and the next moment a tall, slender man, of rather youthful appearance and with singularly large serious eyes entered the room.

He drew back with involuntary dismay on finding himself face to face with so large an assemblage of agitated females, glanced around in hopes perhaps of discovering the Doctor's bulky figure, looked longingly back towards the door, and then evidently making up his mind that instant retreat would be

uncivil, advanced resolutely, and stood before Miss Bartholomew and her two wooden-faced pupils in an attitude of graceful embarrassment, palpably racking his brains for some remark by which to break the awkward silence.

"I must apologise for my intrusion, Miss Bartholomew," he began at last, in a voice whose deep tones fell melodiously on the ear. "I didn't know that the young ladies pursued their studies in the drawing-room."

"Not at all. We are trying to avoid the expense of a third fire ; that is why you find us here," she replied, in sepulchral accents. "Dr. Bogle is gone across to the school, but he will be back in a few minutes. Will you sit down, my lord? Marie, apportez une chaise pour Lord Rotherhame!"

Mary, with ill-advised zeal, rushed to obey. Lord Rotherhame, in well-bred horror, muttered a remonstrance, and springing forward came into collision with his kind assistant, whom the shock propelled violently into her sister's lap.

There was a general outcry, and Geraldine was amused to notice the sudden crimson which flooded the visitor's cheeks, as with rather unnecessarily earnest apologies he raised Mary's prostrate form, and rallied her on the fatal results of trenching on the rights of man.

"Another time," he concluded, "you must leave me to wait upon myself." .

Lord Rotherhame and Miss Bartholomew never talked to one another when they could avoid it, and when circumstances did force them into communication, however the conversation might begin, it invariably ended in their sole topic of common interest, the parish. On some occasions they would arrive at this ultimatum by a circuitous route, at others by a short cut.

To-day it was by a very short one. The good governess, observing that Lord Rotherhame looked inquiringly towards the strangers, observed in a tone, half explanatory, half apologetic—

“Miss Nutting and some young friends staying with our girls.”

Bows followed this ceremonious introduction, and then a long pause, broken by Lord Rotherhame's inquiring in a tone of resignation—

“Well, Miss Bartholomew, and how goes on the parish?”

“Much in the old way I fear, Lord Rotherhame, except that there is perhaps a more hopeful tone among the young men who come specially under Mr. Meules's eye at the night-school. He exercises a quite remarkable personal influence over those with whom he is brought into contact.”

“Oh, really? I mean—of course! You think he is more generally popular than Mr. Pike was?”

“I can hardly say that,” responded Miss

Bartholomew, an austere shade darkening her brow. "Mr. Pike was a man of truly apostolic spirit; a little fiery perchance, but his was the indignation of a St. James or a St. John."

"Yet," replied Lord Rotherhame, "my wildest imagination could no more picture St. John hitting an infant on the head than it could a shepherd converting his lamb into mincemeat. No, Miss Bartholomew, I am convinced that I was right, and that it was not the Old Adam which rose up within me when I found Mr. Pike venting his apostolic indignation in so remorseless a manner on that unlucky infant."

"I know, my lord," replied the lady, with firmness, "the zeal for the Church which you manifest in so liberally supplying out of your own income the stipend of an assistant priest for this parish. But, in insisting on Mr. Pike's dismissal, were you not, if I may presume to say so, countenancing the error of the Dissenters, who providing the salaries of their misguided teachers, think themselves entitled to dictate their course of action? The young person whom Mr. Pike was correcting had been guilty of a serious misdemeanour."

"A 'person' of five years cannot surely be a very serious misdemeanant," persisted Lord Rotherhame, but he added quickly to change the subject: "I wonder, by the way, which of these young ladies would consent to be my almoner," and he turned towards

the Misses Bogle, whose eyes immediately sought the carpet. "Can you, Miss Bartholomew, recommend Ellen"—a Christian name on his lips sounded like a caress—"as a trusty charity commissioner, or will she, like my boy did with his missionary box, confiscate the funds entrusted to her for private purposes?"

Ellen, who had just sense enough to perceive that this was intended for a joke, laughed decorously, but Miss Bartholomew viewed the matter in a very serious light.

"I trust indeed, Lord Rotherham, that you have had no cause to think Ellen intentionally dishonest."

"Heaven forbid!" he cried, dismayed at the ill success of his intended pleasantry. "Let me convince you to the contrary," and he counted out into Ellen's open palm five shining sovereigns, asking her to divide them among her favourite old women.

Ellen received the commission with a profound sense of responsibility, and presently ventured to inquire through half-closed lips—

"How are the Ladies Harold, if you please?"

"They are very well, thank you, and looking forward to seeing you again. We are in high spirits just at present, you know, for on Tuesday we are expecting Berkeley home." And as he spoke a sudden eager light flitted across his face which, no sign of sympathy

being evinced by his companions, faded away as quickly as it came.

Geraldine felt irritated by their apathy, and burned to utter a responsive word, but the heavy atmosphere she breathed choked her utterance, and Lord Rotherhame having but little small talk at his disposal a second embarrassing pause ensued.

As they all sat round in formal silent circle, an irresistible fascination drew her eyes towards the face of the Wizard of her "enchanted castle." It was a peculiar face, oval-shaped, and very grave when in repose. A small moustache of darkest auburn curled over the fine, fastidious lips, and the shadows round the eyelids seemed to suggest either mental care or indifferent health. The eyes had at the moment a proud and weary look, and yet just now, when speaking of his son, she had noticed a sudden brightness flash from their dreamy depths, like lightning skimming the surface of a deep lake.

It seemed to her as though he were environed by a peculiar atmosphere of solitude, that he had the air of a man who for some cause, whether of circumstance or temperament, lives in spiritual isolation from his fellows.

Absorbed in speculation, her gaze was fixed upon him in broad, unconscious scrutiny, and she did not withdraw it till a slight movement and a sudden impatient glance from those very soft eyes suggested to her

that their owner was averse to being criticised. It was a relief to all when the door opened, and Lord Rotherhame, springing from his seat, exclaimed—

“Here comes the Doctor! How are you, Bogle?”

“My dear lord!” cried the good Doctor, swooping down upon his parishioner with outstretched hands, and bearing down before him all such unimportant obstacles as Miss Nutting and the sleeping cat, “how delightful of you to be the first to call; I was just on my way to the castle, it is indeed a joy to welcome you once more amongst us! I hope you have seen enough of Austria now to last you for your life! You have not been waiting here long, I trust?”

“Your absence gave me an opportunity of paying my respects to the ladies,” replied Lord Rotherhame, with a smile.

“Well, I hope they have been pleasant!” said the Doctor, with an easy transition from a fawning to a bullying tone as his unlucky daughters shrank beneath his glance. “And how are you, my lord? tired out as usual with planning and toiling for others? You’ll kill yourself, I know you will, I’ve often told you so!”

A rather sarcastic laugh escaped Lord Rotherhame.

“Charity believeth all things,” he said, “and you are certainly the most charitable of Christians. I am not going to immolate

myself on the altar of sacrifice this Christmas at all events. We shall be quite alone, and I shall be able to enjoy the *dolce far niente* without let or limit."

"What!" interrupted Dr. Bogle, in a tone of unfeigned disappointment, "still no visitors! Dear me, that looks bad for your offertory, Egerton. By the way, I have not yet introduced you to my old friend, Archdeacon Egerton. He is ordered away from the north for a few weeks to get over an attack of congestion, and has kindly promised to preach for me on Christmas Day."

The customary civilities ensued, and at the Doctor's suggestion, the gentlemen, in the interest of the young ladies' studies, removed to the lawn.

Geraldine remained behind, but the apathy which had oppressed her when first she entered the schoolroom had taken flight. Without distinctly analysing her sensations, however, she was conscious that pain predominated over pleasure—she wished that the momentary annoyance which had clouded Lord Rotherhame's brow, when he caught her studying his face, had been called forth by any other than herself.

Her father was particularly interested to make Lord Rotherhame's acquaintance. He was a man whose gifts had at one time raised expectations that he would win distinction in whatever line, literary, scientific, or political, he should choose to follow, and the



Archdeacon, who had been present on the occasion, well remembered the sensation produced in the House when the young Lord Berkeley had made his *début* in a maiden speech of brilliant eloquence, a speech which rising above the blinding dust of party warfare, appealed to the deep principles that lie buried beneath.

But the orator had disappointed the anticipations he had raised, and though he had appeared from time to time before the public, either in Parliament or print, he had invariably shrunk back again from the position of power and influence that might have been his, to hide himself in a perverse obscurity. He kept himself aloof from party, and if he ever raised his voice in public it was to say something that interest forbade others to utter, advocating the cause of honour and patriotism against the narrow selfishness of class prejudice, rather as one who scornfully braves the world's censure than as the reformer who seeks to convert it to his thought. He spoke often with the cynical bitterness of a man who has a quarrel with the world, and indeed life seemed to have done but little to ripen or perfect his character, and he had become moodier and more misanthropical as the years rolled by.

There was a canker evidently at work within ; a secret mischief, which some set down to the calamity of his widowhood, others to a suspected decline of faith.

Whether this last solution were true or no, however, his works of charity were ever on the increase ; he lived systematically below his income that he might have more to give, and few who asked of him, whether their object were personal, religious, or philanthropic, were sent empty away. And yet, despite this open-handed generosity and the fascinating social gifts with which nature had endowed him, Lord Rotherhame was not a popular man. An apparent genial frankness is the safest screen a deep reserve can choose behind which to shrink from the scrutiny of curious eyes, and it was a common complaint that genial and pleasant as he appeared when his acquaintances chanced upon him in the town, or in some lonely forest road where a pause and a *tête-à-tête* were inevitable, he never accepted an invitation, and there was no one in all the neighbourhood who could claim to know him as a friend or could so much as say that they had ever passed a night beneath his roof.

Archdeacon Egerton, however, ignorant of the true value of his new acquaintance's cordiality, knowing him chiefly through his eloquence and his charities, and happy to find himself once more in the company of a gentleman, was altogether favourably impressed with the Earl of Rotherhame, and felt sincerely regretful when he at last took his leave of the Rector and rode away across the forest.

And now that his melancholy face has vanished from the Rectory garden—the face which a smile so rarely visits—let us cast our eye back for a little over the past of the person who has for good or evil, crossed the path of our cheerful young heroine, and see whether it will throw any light on the mystery which, in the opinion of the neighbouring magnates, encompasses the character of the rich peer who, last year, to the surprise of all, refused the coveted distinction of the Lord Lieutenancy of the county of West-shire.

Perhaps Lord Rotherhame's early bringing up had helped to warp what might naturally have been a lovable and noble nature. A happy childhood is a deep well of pure delight, in whose living waters, through the arid years of after life, the thirsty soul may slake its craving—a rainbow memory, out of whose divine colours it may paint for itself a picture of the otherwise unrealizable joys of heaven.

But this rich treasure Lord Rotherhame did not possess ! From the cradle his mother had coldly ignored him, while his father, absorbed in interests of his own, had treated his youthful failings with harshness, and tacitly repulsed his timid advances.

Possessed by a perpetual craving for affection, his heart would have starved for lack of that food of life, but for the faithful devotion of his foster-mother, Mrs.

Weedon, and he grew up to manhood, a lonely dreamer in a world of his own creation ; strong passions breeding within, which, denied all healthy vent, were like to develope into vices.

The gloomy castle walls were his companions. He knew every inch of them, was intimate with the spiders that infested their corners. The figures in the faded tapestry, and the faces of long buried ancestors, looking down from their antique frames, were to him sentient beings whom he knew and loved, and in intercourse with whom he passed his solitary hours.

Suffering, endured in silence, has too often a hardening influence upon the characters it disciplines, and Lord Rotherhame was apt in after life to be a little impatient of weakness in others, and to demand of them the Spartan fortitude which he had been forced to learn.

But his marriage came in time to prevent this stern tendency from fossilizing into a permanent habit, and passing suddenly from the polar rigidity that had chilled his boyhood into a tropical atmosphere of love and enjoyment, he embraced with vague delight the faith that fortune's tide had turned at last, and would henceforward bear to his feet with accumulated interest his long withheld portion of human blessedness.

His young bride brought him no dowry but her beauty, and a pedigree illustrious

enough to satisfy even his haughty mother's requirements. For himself one sight of her had been enough. In eye, on lips, their two souls had met and melted into one, and with ring and priestly blessing the marriage made in heaven had been ratified on earth. The young pair were happy with a serene intense and ever-growing happiness, and he learned eagerly from her loved lips heretofore undreamed-of lessons of sacred truth.

In due time a son was born to them, on whom the parents lavished an almost idolising tenderness. Ralph was a quaint imaginative boy, keenly susceptible to outside influences, and with a strength of will which under bad management might easily have degenerated into obstinacy.

His docility with his parents, to whom he was vehemently devoted, was beyond reproach, but tutors and governesses were not sparing in their complaints of his wilful impatience of control. He was a slightly made child, strangely resembling both father and mother, had dark auburn hair gracefully curling round his small head, a fair skin, and a face that looked all eyes—eyes large, grave, and set close together, like those which Raphael has given to the Babe in his "*Madonna del San Sisto*."

When his eldest son was about fourteen, Lord Rotherhame's youngest child was born, and his wife—his idol—taken from him.

During the last dreadful days in which she

lay hovering between life and death, he, on his knees by her side, spent his strength in agonising prayer that she might be given back to him. At last hope died, and then he rose from his posture of entreaty, and with fierce despair in his eyes sank down beside her, and holding her soft hand in a grasp of iron—as though by strength he could prevail to keep her from the robber-clutch of remorseless death—fastened his gaze upon the precious face which was soon to be hidden from his sight for ever.

Ralph felt instinctively that the closing hours of such a union were too sacred even for the intrusion of his deep love, and he dared do no more than steal in from time to time to kiss in dumb anguish the fingers that were clasped in a last embrace.

The final moment came—minute, moment, in whose shallow compass lies the immensity of the great For-ever. All saw that she was dead, each one in the sorrowing group, that praying, knelt around her, but none dared speak the word, which should tell the husband that his marriage tie was broken. Vaguely they wondered if he knew, patiently waited for him to give some sign of consciousness or natural grief.

At last the chaplain, the friend of their married life, rose from his knees, and softly closed the sweet eyes which, beholding the sweeter vision of the Face of Christ, needed the light of this cold world no longer. Then

a cry was heard—a cry of pain, whose dread vibrations thrilled each heart, and his eyes grew glassy, and the bereaved husband's head sank down upon the breast which heaved no longer with the beat of life.

Fearfully the chaplain beckoned Ralph to approach. The boy obeyed, and winding his arms about his father's neck, found that he had fallen into a deadly swoon.

From that time till the hour when wrapped in her winding sheet the dead Countess was borne from out her sacred peaceful chamber to dwell in silence and in dust, Lord Rotherhame saw her no more, nor dared to face a renewal of that moment whose supreme agony had robbed him of sense and consciousness.

How he lived through the first months of widowhood he could never tell. They were like years to him, but though their phases of misery rose, wave after wave, in infinite variety of woe, they seemed to hold no landmarks by which in after time he could take count of or divide them. Chilled by his inability to receive or respond to it, the friendly sympathy which had at first sprung forth, subsided quickly.

The home life at the Castle returned to its normal conditions, and Lord Rotherhame forced himself to transact his necessary business, and appear as in old times at his table and at church.

To his eldest child he clung with especial

jealous fondness, as to the only object which still made life worth living. Ralph's devotion was equal to the demand upon its strength, but his health suffered from the protracted strain. There came a day when his father all at once realised that his boy's face had grown wan, his manner changed and listless, and then, under a sudden panic, he resolved to part with him, and in the hope that work and the society of other boys would restore him to strength and spirits, sent him off to a private tutor's. His little sisters were left at home in the charge of an attached old governess, and Lord Rotherhame departed for the Continent.

Three years had passed since then, and Lord Rotherhame, after a long absence in foreign lands, broken by short visits to England during his children's holidays, was come back to settle down once more in his old home. This proceeding was hailed by his friends as a token that time had done its work, and that his wound was healing over. The cheerful composure with which he received their welcomes confirmed this impression, and the neighbours began to cherish a hope that the doors, which ever since his mother's death had remained inhospitably closed, would now once more open to receive them at balls and dinners.

Lord Rotherhame himself recognised the necessity of doing the honours of his house to his long-neglected tenantry, and a great



entertainment was in projection for the twenty-third of December.

His children were in high spirits at the prospect of the unwonted gaiety, and their father appeared to share their pleasure. But a great sea had rolled in upon his heart, drowning the sweet hopes and loves that once had budded there, and making of the fruitful land a waste, whereon only thorns and weeds could flourish. The hope of an eternal reunion after death seemed powerless to fertilise that howling wild, swept bare of joy ! Perhaps the remorseless flood, with his other lost treasures, had washed away likewise his faith in God.

## CHAPTER V.

Sing heigh! Sing ho! unto the green holly!  
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.  
SHAKESPEARE.

NOT a hundred miles from the spot where Lord Rotherhame's joy lay buried, fresh trouble was brewing in an unexpected quarter.

From the portico of a big Hanoverian Church in the country town of Deerhurst a sleepy congregation emerged, exchanging soberly the warm atmosphere of cushioned pews and galleries for the raw air of the wintry streets. Except for cooks, from whose subterranean haunts appetising vapours were stealing forth, most of the houses had been for the last two hours well nigh deserted, and over the town, coldly illuminated by the feeble beams of the December sun, a Sabbath stillness had brooded. But now the service was over, the Rector's ornate seven-headed discourse on some hitherto unheard of heresy had worn to the bitter end, and a general bustle restored their wonted cheerfulness to the forsaken streets. Well-dressed matrons with velvet prayer books, spruce young tradesmen in frock-coats and forbidding looking hats, and rejoicing groups of emancipated school children, poured out over the pavements and along the frozen roads; acquaint-

ances, yawning, exchanged greetings, blinds, were drawn up, knockers rapped, and doors opened. Last to leave the church was the Vicar, a sleek, self-satisfied looking personage, who having removed his rich silk gown, passed through the vestry door to join the large family party that awaited him without. His wife put her hand into his arm as he came up with her and leaned languidly upon it. She was his second wife, and the good man sometimes feared that the ultra-fashionable cut of her dresses and mantles might prove a stumbling block to the weaker of his flock. But Mrs. Bradshaw did not trouble herself to consult the prejudices of the Deerhurst people. Before her marriage with the Vicar she had been a gay little widow at Bath, moving, as she was never weary of explaining, in the most select circles of that historical watering-place, and winning admiration from numerous pump-room beaux, dyspeptic bon-vivants and invalided Indian Colonels. Finally, to the surprise of her acquaintances, her late husband's cousin, the Reverend Christopher Bradshaw, had come, seen, conquered, and borne her off in triumph to share his Parsonage, and set the fashions in his parish. Mr. Bradshaw had himself also been previously married, and had one child, Anna, who being a plain unpretending girl was held by her stepmother in very indifferent estimation, while her own daughter, Caroline, was petted, pampered, and brought forward on every possible occasion.

Mr. Bradshaw had soon found his professional income inadequate to satisfy the expensive tastes of his new wife, and to increase it had had recourse to the education of youth. His pupils were at the present moment five in number, of ages varying from fifteen to twenty, and these young gentlemen now strolled homewards arm-in-arm along the pavement at a respectful distance from their preceptor, in all the conscious glory of tall hats and Sunday gloves, pelting each other the while with a continuous hail of small chaff. They had no lack of objects on which to air their wit. Mrs. Bradshaw, her elegant breeding and match-making proclivities, formed a fruitful theme for humorous sallies. Nothing which that unlucky woman wore, said, or did, escaped their amused and contemptuous scrutiny. She must have been an angel to have passed the ordeal unscathed, and the Vicar's wife had certainly not much of the angelic about her. Her daughter Caroline however, being pretty, gay, and partial to masculine society, occupied a higher place in the estimation of her stepfather's pupils. She was good natured, had an unlimited capacity for laughter seasonable and unseasonable, and her social gifts were freely placed at the young gentlemen's disposal. Her father's pupils, fresh to the delights of a flirtation, soon made up their minds that they could not have too much of pretty Caroline's society, and whiled away many a long

idle hour by her side in a state of willing bondage to the tyranny of her airs and graces.

The sun had gone in as Mr. Bradshaw's party reached the Vicarage, a long low building, with green Venetian shutters and verandah to match, and the entire map-like landscape of square houses, ploughed fields and creeping river, was painted in a uniform hue of sodden green, broken here and there by ugly patches of white chalk and brown mud. It was not an inspiring prospect, and the gleam of firelight stealing through the Venetian blinds suggested ideas very cheering to the chilled church-goers. Yet Caroline lingered behind her father on the threshold with eyes fixed anxiously on the advancing pupils. "I must have my talk with him now or never, mamma," she whispered as her mother passed her.

Mrs. Bradshaw nodded mysteriously, and disappeared within the door way. Caroline, fidgeting nervously with her parasol, returned a few steps. One of the pupils had separated himself from the others and now came forward with a bound. He was a tall fair stripling, with a keen sweet face and dark appealing eyes, and his manner, as he bent down to her, was tender and respectful.

"Is it too cold for you to stay out a bit with me, little Carry?" he asked. "You were to make known your request to me after Church, you remember, and I am racked with curiosity. We may not find so good a chance

again." He laid his hand gently upon her arm as he spoke, and drew her away in the direction of the garden.

"All serene, Planty," returned the young lady, jauntily rearranging her fair wavy locks under the shelter of her little pink bonnet. "You have been pretty reasonable considering the frightful impatience of your disposition, so I suppose I must reward you. But how the others will mock to see us two going off alone together."

"Mock!" returned her boy lover smiling, "they will be more inclined to tear their hair with jealousy. Look at poor Murray-Carr there, slinking off to sulk alone. Does not your conscience prick you, heartless child, for the way you have played fast and loose with him?"

"Me heartless? Oh, I sometimes wish I were, Planty. One would be spared a good deal if one had no feelings."

"Upon my word, I am rather of your opinion. Why we human beings of all animals should be blessed with such exaggerated sensibilities is more than I can tell. Cocks don't care when their hens are smothered in bread sauce, nor sheep when their acquaintances are turned into mutton, and why should we be less philosophical? I suppose that the same kind Fate which supplied us with nerves to our teeth and thorns to our gooseberry-bushes, invented further the inconvenient appendage that we call our 'feelings.'"

Caroline was always impatient to recall her companion from the speculative to the actual.

"Oh, it is all very well for you to grumble, you, who are going back to your father and sisters," she said pathetically, "to have a jolly Christmas and no end of gaiety and parties! But I, who am to be left behind in this empty house with only Mamma and Papa, and stupid old Anna, it is I who have the real right to complain. Heavens, what a prospect! I thought I must have burst out crying in Church to-day when I watched your dear old long-legged figure sitting opposite me in the big square pew, and thought how many Sundays I should be looking at your empty place."

"Cheer up, little girl, the 'time will soon come round again,' as my old nurse used to say to me, and we can often write to each other during the six weeks. It is really not worth while to afflict yourself about so short a parting."

"Oh, but it's not that, Planty!" cried Caroline, the tears now beginning to chase each other down her pink cheeks. "It is what may happen in the six weeks! Sometimes a terrible panic seizes me lest your governor should oppose our engagement, and put a stop to your coming back here anymore—and that then—then in time—you might grow to forget me altogether."

"Forget you, Carry! I should indeed be a brute if I could do that, after all your good-

ness to me when I came here first—a shy stupid lout, whom no young lady but yourself would have thought worth speaking to! And your still greater kindness afterwards during my illness, when you gave up everything to amuse me. How should I ever have got through it, shut up alone with my own thoughts? I think I should have ended by going mad! No, Carry, you need not fear I can ever forget what you have been to me.”

“Perhaps not,” returned Caroline, taking him by the arm and drawing him into a small, beetle-haunted arbour, green and damp, into which the frosty mist was stealing. But undeterred by cold and moisture the young pair seated themselves side by side, Caroline after carefully removing her delicate kid gloves taking her lover’s brown boyish hand in her own. “Perhaps not, Planty dear, but yet without actually forgetting all that I once did for you—don’t be in a rage if I speak my secret fears—your feelings may change towards *me*. You may be persuaded that duty to your father requires you to give me up, and oh! my love, if that should ever happen, my poor heart would break! I know, I *know* it would!”

“Don’t give way to such ideas, darling,” he interposed hastily, “that is a point on which I must reject even my father’s interference. He cannot force me to break our solemn engagement. I admit that it was wrong of me to have proposed to you before



getting his sanction, but now that it is done, I am sure that he loves me well enough to forgive me that one slip, particularly when I can make him understand that it was unpremeditated, and that the whole thing took me completely by surprise."

"Of course I don't suspect you of being base enough to break faith with me, dear old fellow," returned Miss Bradshaw, patting his curly head, "and I know I ought to feel quite easy. But, Planty, when I brought you here this morning, it was to tell you of a whim of mine—a silly whim perhaps, but you will not make me wretched by refusing to gratify it, will you? I want a promise, deary, a promise that, come what may, you will never prove false to me and to our plighted love—a written promise that I may keep always by me, and kiss before I go to sleep, and comfort myself with when I am feeling down."

"Oh no," he answered, instinctively recoiling, "why should you want that? We are engaged, and I am resolved in time to marry you in the face of all obstacles. That ought to content you!"

"Then plainly your talk of love is a pretence," cried Caroline, snatching away her hand and bursting into a vehement access of sobs. "You see how wretchedly depressed I am, and won't do one simple easy little thing to make me happier, while I never grudge any pains to save you the least vexation. If you are really true and honourable, what I

ask can in no way increase your responsibility, and if it is your intention to play me false, I only pray you to let me know it at once that I may—

“ Carry, Carry, stop that,” he broke in, distressed. “ Good Heavens, what is to be done? How I do hate to see a girl cry! I must say your doubts of me are not particularly flattering. However, you shall have your way, if only you will dry those tears, and be jolly again. Here, where’s some paper?”

Thanks to Caroline’s forethought pencil and paper were at once forthcoming, and seizing a sheet with a grimace of mingled amusement and annoyance, he dashed off the following words:—

“ I, Ralph, Lord Berkeley, do hereby pledge my solemn word of honour that I will under no circumstances be false to you, Caroline Mabel Bradshaw, and to our plighted troth.

“ Given under my hand and seal this 19th day of December, 186 . Signed.

“ BERKELEY.”

Then with an air of mock formality handing over the document to Caroline, whose tears did not at all prevent her from gathering its import at a glance, he looked at her with real anxiety. She dropped her head however quickly on his shoulder, and it was impossible for him to see her face.

“ Darling Planty,” she murmured, “ how

good you are to give in to my foolish fancies. How I shall love this scrap of paper. I was an idiot ever to doubt you, but you know that it is the nature of true love to be jealous and exacting."

Ralph sighed, as he admitted that "he supposed it was."

"But you are quite satisfied now, are you not, silly thing?" he added fondly.

"Satisfied! ah, yes, love! content, if needs be, to wait for years, now that I have the certainty of possessing you as my very own at last. Oh, I know well that we shall have a fight for it. I know that your father will be saying that we are both too young, and cannot know our own minds. He will possibly object that I am not a swell enough match for you, for all the world knows that mamma is not rich, though no one can deny that she is a perfect lady," and Miss Bradshaw's pretty plebeian face flushed scarlet in the vehemence of her self-assertion.

"My father has very high ideas of love," said Berkeley, thoughtfully, "and I don't think he cares much about titles or money. Pedigree is certainly a little weakness of his, but I think you mentioned, dear, did you not, that you were of a good old family? It is as well to make use of every available argument."

"To be sure I am! You must tell him so," responded Caroline, her flaxen head drooping yet lower as she spoke.

"An awful thought strikes me," said

Berkeley, hastily. "I trust you are not descended from Bradshaw the regicide. You know my dear mother was a Stuart, and my father has an intense and hereditary hatred to Noll and all his crew. Charles the First is our patron saint."

"I'm sure I don't know. I never did take the slightest interest in my great-great-grand-fathers and their second cousins," answered Caroline, secretly gratified however to find that any one of her name should have existed in those remote periods.

"Well, get 'Burke's Landed Gentry,' or whatever it may be, and let us make sure. If you should chance to be of cavalier origin that would be a great point gained."

"Certainly not, Planty," returned Caroline, who was but too well aware that no member of her race had been immortalised by Burke or Debrett, "I shall be very angry if you make use of such degrading arguments. I trust your father is not one of those old pokers who are always boring one with tedious details about the births, deaths, and marriages of every Brown, Jones, and Robinson they come across."

"Wait till you know him, and then judge whether he is the sort of man to concern himself about any Brown, Jones, or Robinson in existence," returned Berkeley, smiling. "Don't be so spiteful, miss, or I shall introduce you to him as the favourite granddaughter of that dentist Bradshaw at

Knighton, whom he is never weary of denouncing for the good teeth which he once tore out of my unlucky jaws."

Caroline gave a violent start, but perceiving the amazement with which her lover regarded her, quickly resumed her composure.

"Now drop this dull subject, Planty, and let us talk of something more amusing. How I do look forward to seeing your home! and I feel convinced that I shall get on swimmingly with your father and the girls. They must be most awfully good-looking to judge by their photos. The only thing I am just a little scrap sorry for, is that you live in such a very antediluvian style of building. It doesn't give one a comfortable homey feeling. A place half in ruins would make one feel as if one were at an eternal picnic."

"Every one admires Rotherhame," returned Berkeley, not a little piqued. "I love every stick and stone of it as the Jews love Jerusalem. It is my Holy Land."

"Yes, of course, and I shall adore it too, and if the old armour and ghosts, and all that, should ever bring on the blues, nothing will be easier than to trot off to Brighton or London, where a good ball is always to be had for the asking. I wonder how many I shall get through a night in the season, Planty, my boy, and whether you would tear me to pieces if any harmless admirer should come dangling at my heels."

"Aha, my lady! you have changed your

tune pretty considerably ! A month ago the story was that you would never tire of being at Rotherhame, and now you are full of schemes for getting away from it."

"Bosh, sir ! Don't be always taking me up the wrong way. Did you not yourself tell me last night that you loved dancing and theatres and riding in the Row, and mayn't I do the same ?"

"Yes, certainly. I myself like London in the spring, and while there, won't grudge you any number of admirers, provided you don't charter a great army of louts to pursue us down into the country, and disturb our peace. We always live entirely to ourselves when we are at home. My father says that solitude is dull, but not so dull as the West-shire society—a society dreadfully select, willing to swallow any amount of idealess inanity, so long as it can claim kinship with the few viscounts, baronets and squires that the county boasts, but rigidly exclusive of all talent, wit, or genius, over which the 'land' has not cast the shadow of its purple."

Carry stared. To stand upon an eminence on which one might presume to scoff at "county society," was a height to which her wildest flight of fancy had never yet soared.

"I want you to see a great deal of our jolly old tenants and servants," he continued persuasively ; "my mother always impressed upon me that I must live among my people,

and put their interests before my own pleasures."

"Don't fear, I'll do the ministering angel to perfection among the dear old fogies, and dose them *ad. lib.* with Bibles and blankets."

A momentary shadow once more flitted across Berkeley's brow, as the discrepancy between his chosen bride's ideas of life and those to which he had been brought up forced itself disagreeably upon his notice. But Caroline, soaring high on gossamer wings of anticipation, failed to observe his change of expression and broke his grave silence with a laugh.

"I say, Planty, what would your dear papa think if he had seen me taking smoking lessons *sub rosa* of your friend, Murray-Carr?"

"For goodness sake, Carry! never give him the dimmest suspicion that you have ever had a cigar in your mouth. Your rashness will ruin us."

"Don't distress yourself, old man, I am quite sufficiently terrified at the idea of making my relation-in-laws' acquaintance to be on my best behaviour when the awful time comes. But how can I go on chaffing like this when I am on the brink of such a sea of bothers? Would it not be wiser, deary, as we cannot possibly be married just yet, to put off mentioning it to Lord Rotherhame for the present? Every month makes you more of a man, and who knows if you tell

him now, but he may prevent your coming back next term."

"Carry, it is my turn to ask a favour now. Do not I beg you, ask me to put off telling him any longer. All these six weeks it has haunted me like a night-mare. Each kind trustful letter that my father writes goes like a knife to my heart. I can deceive him no longer, but at all risks must absolutely make a clean breast of everything the first night we are together."

"Well, well, I can't say you are wise, but since you are so bent upon it I will grin and bear it. Only don't look so fearfully dismal. Your face is long enough for a mute's at a funeral. Bother take it! There is the bell ringing! I must run in, and change my wet boots for dinner. Does not some one else want to come up too and take a peep in the glass at his jolly black eyes, eh?" and rising, she coquettishly tapped him on the cheek.

"Silly child!" said Berkeley, kissing her fair, plump fingers, and gazing up with wistful appeal into her face. "You will be a good girl to me always, won't you, Carry, for I may have to give up what I love better than life for your sake?"

"Bless me, yes, Planty! Don't be meeting troubles half way. We'll be jolly as cocks when we are married," and Caroline, withdrawing her fingers, sped rapidly away along dull rows of cabbages, bare flower-beds, and borders whitened by the frost.



Berkeley unconsciously passed his hand across his brow, as though to sweep away a painful thought. Listlessly his eye travelled over the dreary scene before him, the broad, earthy sweep on which the sky was spreading its grey, damp mantle, and whose brown clods were gradually loosening beneath a cold, slow thaw. In the distance he could see the train slowly emerging from the dingy station sheds—a slow procession of toy-like carriages, which, creeping onwards between chalky embankments, gradually increased in speed, till it was lost to sight in a deep cutting in the hill-side. He heard the shriek of the whistle, and in fancy followed the invisible monster on its progress across the distant country, towards that home whither he himself must journey in the space of eight-and-forty hours. For the first time in his life he contemplated the return to his *dulce domum* without a thrill of anticipative rapture. The last half-hour had placed upon his already burdened shoulders a fresh and heavy load of care. True it was, he reasoned with himself, that he had been equally bound to Caroline before giving her his written promise. And yet the contract between them seemed within that hour to have assumed hard and fast lines, and to have degenerated from a soft bond of mutual attachment into a fetter that galled and pinched. No more possibility now of bending his conduct to suit the exigencies of changing circumstance,—he had cut out his

future in stone, and clear and hard it stared him in the face. He began to feel like a monk who has taken the final vows, and who, while stooping his head to be covered by the emblematic pall, looks back regretfully on the world he has forsaken—the world whose freedom and pleasure are never more alluring than when they are beyond our reach. A horror of the estrangement which his confession might produce between his father and himself crept coldly over him, and he would have given worlds to buy back the last year from the treasures of eternity, and to have life before him free and untrammelled as when he first entered the Bradshaw household.

Was she—the question would force itself upon him—a treasure indeed worth the great price that he must pay for her? Did not her superficial chatter already weary him a little? did he not sometimes shrink, almost in disgust, from her lack of refinement in word and feeling? Was he never conscious of a secret relief when the time came to exchange her presence for the society of his fellow pupils? did he not find in them a sympathy and comprehension which he vainly sought in her? Deepest anxiety of all, would she not hinder him in his struggles towards what was high and holy—the ideal which his mother's death had placed before his eyes as the one object worth attaining? But before he had had time to think them, Berkeley, with

crimsoning cheeks, flung these reflections from him. Weak cowardice in himself they seemed, base treachery to Love, whose sway he had been taught to honour as sacred and supreme. Let unavailing regrets and tremors be flung aside, and let him go forward to meet the future with all the burning courage which true love would have inspired, could he have felt it otherwise than in imagination, only ! Could he but convince his father—and here the genuine passion asserted its natural pre-eminence over the counterfeit—that the long concealment had been the result, not of undutiful indifference, but of unforeseen circumstance, could he but bring him to look on his betrothed with favour, all might yet be well. Life had hitherto been gracious to the young heir of Rotherhame—sorrow, for his first fourteen years, nothing but a name. He was yet capable of hoping, with a remnant of the unreasoning faith of childhood, that he should still wake up some fine morning and find his troubles vanished of themselves, like evil dreams of night. And yet all the time, for Ralph, the bright Eden slopes of young existence were already left behind, and before him a steep and flinty road led straight downwards into the shadow which bounds for each of us the horizon of our days.

The circumstances through which Lord Rotherhame's son had drifted into a position so destructive to his peace of mind were these. It was the old story—the petty manœuvres

of unscrupulous meanness sowing the seeds of a future tragedy. Mrs. Bradshaw, a skilful campaigner, ever watchful for opportunities, had, when he was first placed under her husband's care, taken advantage of young Berkeley's delicacy of health to constitute him habitué of her drawing-room. Her own sofa was given up to the invalid, dainties were prepared to tempt his appetite, and delicate attentions awaited him on all sides, which he, a novice in the ways of this wicked world, received as so many proofs of disinterested attachment. Of a sensitive and affectionate disposition, his profound grief at his mother's loss had made him at that period feverishly eager for mental distractions, unusually alive to the influence of womanly sympathy. Except for his sisters he had never known any girl intimately, and the pretty, obliging Caroline, who gave up her own amusements that she might enliven him, quickly made of him a fast and grateful friend. It was a fresh interest in his life to sit over the fire with her, *tête-à-tête*, sipping tea, and reading out the secret effusions of his leisure moments, poems and tales of horror. He liked to hear her secrets, to watch her pretty movements as she arranged the flowers or played the piano, and though the thought of falling in love with her never crossed his boyish brain, there were times when a dawning idea of flirtation added spice to his enjoyment of her company. But this easy-going alliance

was not to last. Mrs. Bradshaw was on the watch, and when she thought the affair was ripe, determined to enlighten the unsuspecting youth as to the nature of his own emotions. At a certain picnic to which the family had invited a number of their friends he was loitering about as usual with Caroline, when it fell out in the most unaccountable manner that one by one each other member of the party disappeared, and the young couple, after wandering about for hours in fruitless search, were finally compelled to walk home at evening, through pelting rain, without them. Mrs. Bradshaw simulated deep distress at the occurrences she had herself arranged, the tongues of parish scandal-mongers, it seemed, were all wagging at her daughter. Carry had caught cold, and for some days was unable to leave her room. At the end of that time Mrs. Bradshaw summoned Berkeley to a private conference in her boudoir, and with an aspect of over-mastering maternal agitation, took his breath away by the intelligence that Caroline was, thanks to him, the "talk" of the neighbourhood, that every one knew her illness had been caused by the passionate intensity of her feeling for him, and that he had now gone too far to recede with honour. She indignantly demanded whether it had been his design to trifle with her poor child's affections? and told him that she must know his intentions at once or she would be compelled to request his immediate removal home, with a complaint

to his father of his heartless and dishonourable conduct towards those who had constantly sought to show him all the kindness in their power. These severe threats wound up with a timely return to the pathos of injured feeling. Then, perceiving how deep an impression she had produced, the experienced matron tried a fresh tack, and proceeded to translate to him his emotions of distress and consternation as symptoms invariably indicative of the tender passion. Finally followed a scene with Caroline, who came in upon him abruptly, blushed, wept, and prematurely fell upon his neck. This catastrophe decided his fate, and almost before he was aware of it Lord Berkeley found himself the accepted suitor of Miss Bradshaw. He was easily persuaded that it was the wisest course to postpone asking his father's consent till he could do so by word of mouth.

Mr. Bradshaw was much disturbed in mind when the brilliant success of his wife's stratagems was first revealed to him, and it was some time before his professional instincts could recover the rude shock they had sustained sufficiently to enable him to sanction the engagement. But he was a weak and worldly man, without the refinement of either birth or culture, and his wife's determination, aided by the tempting glitter of her daughter's coming coronet, proved in the end stronger than his scruples. An apparently reluctant consent was wrung from him, and

Mrs. Bradshaw having thus victoriously overleaped in turn each obstacle as it barred her path, now saw but one remaining; the consent of Berkeley's father to his marriage with her daughter! The critical moment was approaching, and no precaution must be omitted that could guard against failure. Stretched on her sofa, trembling with nervous anticipation, Mrs. Bradshaw waited to hear from Carry's lips the success of her latest effort to ensure her hard-won prize.

"Well mamma!" exclaimed the girl peevishly, as she entered the darkened and heavily scented boudoir, "I have done what you told me, and here is his promise, in black and white!" And she flung on the carpet, at her mother's feet, the crumpled scrap of paper penned by Berkeley in the arbour. Mrs. Bradshaw's eyes gleamed, and raising herself with more energy than one could have deemed her capable of, she picked up and perused it with greedy haste.

"You dear good girl!" she exclaimed in delighted accents. "Nothing *could* be better. Now indeed our minds may be at rest. Having given such a pledge as this, a young fellow of his sort will go through fire and water rather than break it. And I don't conceal from you now, pet, how anxious all that I have heard from him about Lord Rotherhame has made me."

"Well, I have followed your directions," returned Caroline with a glance almost of

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disgust at her mother's open triumph, "but all I can is, that you are forcing me into marrying a young fellow I don't care two raps about, and if the poor wretch suffers for it, it is your fault, not mine."

"Car, Car, what an undutiful speech! to your own mother too, who has slaved for your interest, and to whom you will owe a position that the proudest lady in the land might envy. But for me you might be buried in a little country village all your life, and perhaps even see that plain, dowdy Anna married before you. Besides, the idea of talking of Plantaganet being a sufferer, when he's over head and ears in love with you. Why the sacrifice is yours if anyone's."

"Well, I only hope it may turn out for his happiness, poor fellow. I'm sure I mean to do the best I can for him when we are spliced, though it's impossible to keep from laughing a little sometimes at his ridiculous high-flown expressions."

"Very natural too, and there is no harm in your doing so, it is nothing but a little bit of fun," returned Mrs. Bradshaw, eager to ally all qualms of conscience in her daughter. "But oh, my love! you should have seen Mrs. Atkinson's face this morning when she observed his attentions to you coming out of church, her great gawks of girls gaping behind her with their mouths wide open, and looking positively green with jealousy. Mrs. Atkinson noticed how you hurried past her,



and told me she supposed you had grown too grand to speak to any of them since you had become engaged to a nobleman."

These words brought back a smile to Carry's lips. "I shall invite her to spend a week with me when I am settled at the Castle," she said with an airy toss of her fair head, "and try whether the poor old cat will feel much in her element there. Hark, that's the second bell, mamma—I shall change my things and be down in half a minute."

## CHAPTER VI.

The cold hand of charity.

YOUNG.

It was a pleasant change to pass from the wintry garden into the warm red-curtained parlour where the inmates of Deerhurst Vicarage were seated at their mid-day meal. The Vicar, presiding at one end of the long table, was filling plate after plate with ample portions of juicy beef steak pudding, whose smoke ascending from the dish encircled his bald forehead with a kind of halo. His children and scholars were ranged on either side, and at the opposite extremity the lady of the house, with a vacant seat beside her for the only titled pupil, leaned back in her chair as though the exertion of sitting up were almost too great to be endured. The stillness of the room was broken only by the clatter of knives and forks, and by interesting half-audible requests that Gore would pass the mustard, or Vesey help Lawrence to potatoes. Two anxious looking maids, their hair thrust back into chenille nets, and with infinitesimal caps perched upon their chignons, wildly endeavoured to obey the conflicting orders which echoed from side to side, seldom completing the round of the table however with-

out nearly braining some young gentleman with the plates or bedewing him with scalding gravy. Last at the table to receive her portion was Mrs. Bradshaw's little orphan niece, the off-spring of a run-away match between that lady's sister and an obscure clerk in her father's mercantile house. The child when not at school spent most of her time with old Mrs. Middleton, her maternal grandmother, and never till this occasion had Mrs. Bradshaw stooped so far as to invite the unfortunate little creature to sojourn beneath her roof. The advantage to her of mixing for once in really refined society would, her aunt considered, be incalculable, and as some slight return for such a privilege Dolly Weedon was expected for the nonce to act not only as general drudge but household fetish, on whose head its varying tempers might be safely vented. Dolly, who despite her lowly extraction had a proud spirit of her own, did not fall in kindly with this arrangement, and not unfrequently met the exactions of her oppressors with an uncompromising defiance. She was a fair, plump child, and her dark arched brows and high straight nose assorted ill with her coarse stuff frock and washed-out pinafore. At the mild remonstrance which Berkeley's unpunctual appearance extracted from Mr. Bradshaw, her dark blue eyes gleamed with malicious merriment, avenged by a pull of the hair as the tall boy passed behind her to take the place of honour

at Mrs. Bradshaw's side. Berkeley was the only person in the Rectory whom Dolly looked on as a friend. She was wont to follow him about silently like a little tame dog, and he, on his side, was never happier than when he had her on his knee, teasing her or telling her stories. Mrs. Bradshaw resented the notion that her pauper niece should share the notice of her daughter's aristocratic admirer, to-day however she pardoned the confidential glances which passed between the two, and welcomed Berkeley with a triumphant twinkle of the eye. But pleasure could no more recall to life the traditional prettiness of Mrs. Bradshaw's countenance than could her habitual expression of languid discontent, and Berkeley, as he glanced at the pale puffy features which no high or generous emotion had ever warmed with healthful glow, thought with a secret shudder: "Will my Carry ever come to look like that?"

"You are late," she whispered, "but I must not scold. They used to tell me in my girlish days that love is blind, and I daresay you were quite unconcious out there in the garden that the sun had gone in and it was getting cold."

"Oh no, I felt half frozen, but Carry and I had some business together, and we couldn't come in till it was settled. I hope she'll be none the worse."

"I hope not, but she is one quite cast in my mould—a frail treasure, dear Lord Berkeley,

her—a great strong girl as she is—never to be willing to help poor Car—to-day in particular too,” she added, with a meaning glance at Berkeley.

“Would you allow me to take your class for you, Miss Anna?” interposed Murray-Carr, “I have been getting up the Dukes of Edom lately, and have a special gift for influencing the young, at least so my father kindly says, and he being a Bishop ought to know. I have ‘Peter Parley’ at my fingers’ ends, and could repeat ‘Peep of Day’ and ‘Old Humphrey’ to the little folks by the hour.”

Anna ignored the unwelcome jest. “Well, since I am to go, I had better be off at once without waiting for pudding,” she said bitterly, and having paused a moment to see whether anybody would combat her resolve, she rose and left the room with an air of disappointment.

“Anna is admirably fitted for the wear and tear of parish life,” said Mrs. Bradshaw, confidentially lowering her voice as was her wont in addressing Berkeley. “She is quite her papa’s Curate, and much happier in that capacity, poor thing, than she would be in the position of a lady of fortune, which though quite congenial to her sister, would be totally unsuited to Anna’s tastes and feelings. She is an excellent creature at bottom; though at times I must confess she does try me! You will understand what I mean, for

you really seem the only one among the pupils who can enter into my trials. I often think that you, like me, must have found it painful on first coming here, the being thrown so much with those great rough bears of fellows, after the refined aristocratic atmosphere to which you have been used at home."

From this point Mrs. Bradshaw set off into a fresh cross-examination of Berkeley upon his uncles, aunts, and cousins to the fifth degree, a perennial source of interest to her mind. She revelled in their high-sounding names, lingering over them as a connoisseur over a wine of exquisite bouquet, and looked proudly forward to the day when she should be able to describe them all as "my connections."

Her investigations were rudely interrupted by a scream, some yelps, and a scuffle from a distant corner of the table, and a cry arose that Dolly had been bitten by Tiny Tit. Tiny Tit was the being loved best on earth by Mrs. Bradshaw—herself excepted. He was a yellow, overgrown, ill-tempered animal, detested by the rest of the household in proportion to the affection borne him by his mistress, and Dolly, who was the principal sufferer from his exactions, hated him with a special hatred. His offences were oftentimes visited on her head, and on those days when it did not please him to walk, she was compelled to bear his heavy body in her arms after the Bath chair which contained his patroness. Now at last open hostilities had broken out,

and public opinion, as represented by Mrs. Bradshaw and Caroline, at once acquitted the dog and pronounced the child the aggressor. Poor Dolly! It seemed to her excited fancy that twenty accusing voices screamed out her guilt in her ears, and that twenty pairs of hands thrust her forward towards her enraged relative. Mrs. Bradshaw slapped her several times lightly on the cheek with the back of her small fat hand, and then, with an air of ineffable disgust, requested her to leave the room. Dolly, goaded into rebellion, stood sturdily before her aunt, her brown fists clenched, and her face flooded with crimson. "Horrid Tiny!" she exclaimed in tones of stout defiance, "I hate him, I do, and you too, aunt, for taking his part against me!"

"Don't presume to address me in that manner, miss! Your conduct, Dorothy, is grossly ungrateful. After all my kindness, which so few in my position would have shown, you turn upon me as if I were a dragon. You need to be taught your place and made to keep it, you little conceited pussy-cat. Possibly your grandmother may not object to your rude coarse ways," she continued, applying a silver vinaigrette to her nose, "but to me they are painful in the extreme. Be off this minute!" And clapping her hands with revived energy, Mrs. Bradshaw drove the now weeping Dolly from the room. She could not help observing that

Lord Berkeley did not look best pleased at the hard measure dealt out to his little friend, and, when dinner over, she beckoned him to follow her into the privacy of her boudoir, he obeyed with obvious unwillingness.

"The good-bye day has almost come, dear Lord Berkeley," she began affectionately, taking his hand as she sank back upon the sofa, "and if you don't think me quite too barbarous in keeping you from Carry, there is a little something that I must talk over with you before you go. Don't be frightened at what I am going to tell you. I wish I could prepare you a little for it, but perhaps suspense is worse than certainty, however painful."

"What on earth is coming?" thought Ralph. "Yes, much worse," he answered aloud. "Please tell me quickly whatever it is."

"I can hardly bear even to think of it," said Mrs. Bradshaw, wiping her eyes; but urged by an involuntary movement of impatience from Ralph, she added solemnly: "Do you know an old woman on your papa's estate, named Weedon — a woman of the lowest class, in your papa's own service, in fact."

"I know her very well, and my father is fonder of her than of almost any person living. But she is by no means of the lowest class, she is about the most respectable person in the place."



"Perhaps so, but that does not alter the distressing fact that I, through a shocking and unnatural *mésalliance*, have been actually brought into family connection with a *servant*!! Try to bear what I am going to tell you; Dolly is Mrs. Weedon's grandchild!"

Lord Berkeley neither fainted nor went into hysterics, but he did look very much astonished. "That's rather awkward, isn't it?" he said after a pause, "my father must know however that all families are liable to such mischances."

"How sweet you are to say so, and to take it all so calmly. I feel that, now you are one of us, you ought to share our family secrets, and I wanted you especially to know this one, for alas! just at this juncture what should the tiresome old woman do but take it into her head to ask Dolly to spend Christmas with her. It is the first time that she has taken the slightest notice of her, and what possesses her to do so now I cannot imagine!"

"Can she really be poor Charles Weedon's child?" said Berkeley excitedly. "Just to think of my having lived in the same house all these weeks with the heroine of our murder story, and never known it! Why it was only yesterday that I had a letter from my sister Lettice, telling me that Mrs. Weedon had made up her mind to try and get over her shrinking from seeing Charley's daughter, and had asked her down for a few weeks'

visit. She has always till now had such a dread of anything that might remind her of him."

"Well, I'm sure I should not have thought she cared so much about him, she's never written a word to the child, nor so much as sent her a sixpence. But now I want your advice as to what we had better do. I am convinced that nothing should be allowed to transpire which could possibly prejudice your papa against Car, until he knows her personally, and other difficulties are smoothed away."

"He probably knows all about this already. Mrs. Weedon tells him everything."

"No, for I believe she knows nothing herself. When her son perished in that shocking way, my dearest mamma most nobly came forward and offered to take charge of the child, and Dolly has spent her school holidays with her ever since. Mrs. Weedon has held no sort of communication with mamma till about a fortnight ago, when she wrote to say that she wished Dolly to come to her. Now what do you say? shall I write to mamma, explain about you and Carry, and beg her to put the old woman off till another time?"

"No," said Berkeley with sudden decision, "if you ask me, I would a thousand times rather that my father should know everything at once. I never wish to keep another secret from him, and I don't see why the fact

of your sister having married beneath her should make him think any the worse of Carry."

Mrs. Bradshaw would fain have combated a decision which seemed to her fraught with peril, but a very little conversation on the point showed her that Berkeley's mind was immovably made up. So, although she felt inclined to pinch him for his perversity, she presently made a pretence of coming round to his opinion; and wound up by growing sentimental over what she termed "the great sorrow of my life." "My poor sister was as much deceived as any one of us," she said. "She was aware indeed that Mr. Marley, as the man used to call himself, had no means, and indeed papa had on that account forbidden the engagement. But Fan was like myself, a creature all feeling and romance. She considered Marley a gentlemanly fellow, and never thought of inquiring more about his family than he chose to tell her. I shall always chiefly blame my brother Henry, the one we are expecting home from America, for the whole business. It was he who took Marley out of his proper place by his notice, and brought him and Fanny together. I am sure when I remember that, and think of all the misery it produced, I sometimes wonder whether after all it is not wrong of me to have poor Dolly here, and give her ideas beyond her natural station. But I never can forget that she is my only sister's only

child, and I feel," she added, raising her eyes to the ceiling, "that if Fan could peep down from the place of bliss, she would bless me for acting from time to time the tender mother's part towards her helpless orphan. Tell me that you do not think any the worse of me, my dear Plantaganet, for yielding in this instance to the impulse of the heart?"

Berkeley was unable to find words exalted enough to suit her elevation of sentiment, and while he was pondering the question a call to the pupil-room opportunely released him from his embarrassment. In parting, Mrs. Bradshaw squeezed his hand affectionately, and he left her, feeling strongly disinclined to plunge with his fellow students into the bygone mysteries of the Book of Habbakkuk.

## CHAPTER VII.

And grey walls moulder round, on which dull Time  
Feeds like slow fire upon a hoary brand.

SHELLEY.

It was the week before Christmas, a bitter winter afternoon. The sun had been shining all day long in the cold blue sky, but towards evening heavy snow clouds drifted up and lay piled in threatening masses above the roofs and steeples of St. Dunstan's. An icy wind sweeping down the streets, and bursting with fury on unguarded corners, hastened the steps of such passers-by as were bound homeward to blazing hearths and cozy tea tables, but awakened dismal apprehensions in the breasts of the thinly clad and shivering poor. The tattered beggar on the old church steps raised his bleared eyes ruefully to where, above his head, the weather-cock pointed due north-east, and shuddered at the prospect of the coming night. The shops were already resplendent in their Christmas dresses. The butcher enlivened his ghastly show with heads of martyred swine, laurel crowned, and ever feeding on miraculously undiminished apples, and in the round bow-window of the pastry-cook's corner shop a fairy grove of trees bearing frosted fruits and coloured candles, had sprung up as if by magic. But the most heart-warming sight of all was the grand

front of the grocer's shop, a bower of mistle-toe and burnished evergreens, from whose mystic shades gleamed forth apples fit for the garden of the Hesperides, luscious figs, golden dates, and other dainties, tantalisingly enticing to the hungry urchins who flattened their blue noses against the window panes.

Down the High Street rolled a big barouche, drawn by a pair of high-stepping horses, and containing a cheerful company. Lord Rotherhame, his eyes fixed on the tall graceful youth opposite, whose father he looked far too young to be, talked half abstractedly with Josceline Murray-Carr, whom Ralph had brought home to spend Christmas with him. He was reflecting with satisfaction on the happy result of his heir's absence from home. The sad lines of grief which his heart had ached to mark, seemed to have vanished as completely as do the snow-wreaths of old Winter when the young Spring blows on them with her fragrant breath; his cheeks had recovered their rounded outline, his listless eyes their brightness. Edward, his little brother, sat upon his knee, his fair curls blowing in the wind, his big blue eyes fixed with innocent wonder on Ralph's tall hat, his rosy Cupid lips wasting freely on his brother's coat sleeve the kisses for which they seemed to have been created.

Murray-Carr, with an unsparing frankness warranted by life-long intimacy, poured forth meantime into the unsympathetic ears of his

Tory host his satisfaction at the spread of Liberal opinions in the country. "Slowly but surely," he announced with impressive solemnity, "the tide of progress is rising never to turn back. Take an instance! when I first went to school Radical principles were almost entirely confined to the masters. Fellows went in for a kind of mawkish Conservatism, following like sheep in the traditions of their fathers. Now, on the contrary, you would find dozens of them proud to bear the name of Communist. Depend upon it, the rising generation will see the abolition of Privilege! It must be so! The Christian religion itself, as we know it, can scarcely out-live another century."

"It must be a kind consideration for your father's newly born episcopal dignity, my dear Josceline," said Lord Rotherhame, "which induces you to grant such an unreasonably long tenure of life to Christianity. What think you of it all, my Ralph?" he added, turning to Berkeley. "Have you also enlisted in Tom Paine's noble army?"

"Dear me, no," interrupted Josceline, "Ralph has had too much upon his mind of late to spare a thought for abstract questions. He sticks in theory indeed to certain worn-out imbecile notions of Divine Right, and professes unbounded admiration for such miscreants as Charles the First, Louis the Sixteenth, and the Comte de Chambord, whom the judgment

of the People has rightly doomed to eternal contempt, but he takes not the faintest interest in the great forward movements which are going on in Society, and of which the three R's, Rationalism, Republicanism, and Revolution, are healthy and hopeful symptoms. Like Gladstone, he has stumbled on the rock of superstition, and if he goes on as he has begun, will meet at last the just punishment of being trampled under the heels of an indignant and enlightened generation ! ”

“ One might think if one shut one's eyes,” replied Lord Rotherhame, shrugging his shoulders, “ that the Day of Judgment, reformed in accordance with the improved taste of the times, had arrived, and that the great of all ages were assembled to receive their sentence from the enlightened lips of Mr. Josceline Carr. You will scarcely be so eloquent in two or three years time, my dear boy. But tell me, what is it that has been so absorbing Berkeley's thoughts as to leave him no leisure for politics ? I shall cherish hopes now of being able occasionally to get my *Times* to myself.”

“ Really, Lord Rotherhame, if you wish your son to keep up an interest in public affairs, you should not send him to a house where beauty lays siege to the senses, as she does at Deerhurst Vicarage,” returned Josceline, deliberately disregarding his friend's warning kick. “ Ask the lovely Miss Bradshaw where Berkeley spends his leisure moments.”



Lord Rotherhame affected to smile, but shot an uneasy scrutinizing glance at his son's conscious face. "Indeed!" he said. "I only saw one young lady last year when I escorted Berkeley to Mr. Bradshaw's, and she did not strike me as being dangerously beautiful."

"Oh! but it was Anna you saw," burst in Berkeley impulsively, "she is undeniably ugly. It is her step-sister, Caroline, who is the beauty of the neighbourhood."

"Oh! brother," said Edward reproachfully, "Daddy says we are never to call a lady ugly. Miss Oliver is very brown and thin, quite the worst lady I have ever seen, and even she is not more than plain."

The horses had now gained a slight eminence, whence the grim ivied towers of Rotherhame Castle first loomed upon the view through the fast-falling shades of night. A seething mist concealed the broken park-land which sinking abruptly on each side of the road gave an impression of almost fathomless depth. The plaintive voices of sheep come up hoarsely from below, mingled with the gurgle of an unseen river. Here and there a pile of logs, wattled park-fence, or crooked thorn-tree, magnified into unnatural proportions, stood out like an islet above the vapourous waves, and the coarse blades of grass and thistles by the roadside were white with hoar frost. Ralph started from his seat, and his dark eyes kindled as they

caught the first glimpse of his beloved home.

There is a double charm about the home of our childhood when, in addition to all its dear personal associations, we know that our little grandfathers and grandmothers once chased each other under the shifting shade of trees where we ourselves have played, and where our descendants will play when we in our turn have passed away. Rotherham Castle was a place on which centuries had set their mark. The long fish-ponds in the garden, with the white water lilies blowing on their still surface, and mossy green sward creeping round their edges, called up pictures of troublous times gone by, when the denizens of the fortress, shut off from outer supplies, had been forced to depend for sustenance on their internal resources. The moat, and the loop-hole windows, now peacefully garlanded with green, reminded one that days had been in which, within their massive shelter, brave knights had guarded dames and maidens from the onslaught of invading barons. Light and wind appeared to be at home with the ancient pile they had known so long, and there seemed a special tenderness in the caress of the breeze as it wandered at will about the ruins, in the kiss of the sun as his beams fell through the ivy-grown casements in chequered brightness on the chilly stones within. Girt about by the solemn depth of the forest, this place looked so entirely a relic

of by-gone ages, that one could have fancied it was only lingering on in the time-transformed world by virtue of some magic spell, which had enchanted it to changelessness in the era when witches, genii, and fairies harboured in English soil. One cannot but pity the inhabitants of new countries which have no historic traditions or monuments to look to for the inspiration of their fancy, and yet there is no spot on earth which is without its Past. The continents and islands of recent discovery have indeed a Past of especial sacredness, for giant trees, magnificent profusions of tangled flowers and gorgeous plants, reveal that there, unaided, or unhindered by pigmy human efforts, the Divine Gardener has been at work, and Nature has spent the ages alone with God.

"A house ought to have an individuality like a person," said Ralph reflectively. "Ours is a venerable old party who has lived to a ripe old age, and has had too varied experiences to be local, petty or narrow-minded. I wonder how people can ever get to connect any feeling of home with those horrid modern mansions, with their curtainless beds, glaring plate glass windows, and prodigal supply of gas and publicity."

"I sometimes think I would exchange!" said Lord Rotherhame suddenly, "one needs to be young to find melancholy a luxury."

His eye rested as he spoke on the stern mass of the Keep, above which the moon rose,

round and red, out of a rift in the heavy snow-clouds. From the moment they had crossed the drawbridge, and entered the Castle enclosure—a wide wall, guarded by short formidable towers—the brightness of his face had fled, darkened by a look of indescribable and brooding weariness.

The carriage crossed a courtyard of broken irregular buildings, and drew up before an iron-studded door, overhung by a portcullis, and deeply set in a massive wall. In a moment it was surrounded by a troop of dogs, whose deep tumultuous greeting promptly summoned butler and footmen. Ralph followed his father and friend into the house with lingering steps. The remembrance was pressing coldly on his heart that for him now no warm motherly arms were outstretched in welcome, that the sweet eyes which had been wont to smile joy and love upon him were for ever sealed in sightless sleep. It was hard to come home and amid the many greetings miss her voice, tantalising to torture to catch something of her look on the features of her children, and to know that the flesh out of which they were moulded was changing into dust.

“Ralph, Ralph! where’s Ralph, father?” cried the voice of his eldest sister. The next moment she had thrown herself into his arms, while two little golden-haired girls of eight and three clung round his knees, covering his hands with shy silent kisses.

"Come, come, young ladies, moderation in all things, let me have a word with your dear brother!" exclaimed, with a series of nervous giggles, a quaint little old lady with twinkling black eyes, and rows of stiff corkscrew curls fastened up on each side of her head by a pair of tortoiseshell combs. "How are you, my dear Lord Berkeley? very pleased to see you back again, I'm sure! What! going to give me a kiss? Oh, fie, fie!" and the giggles burst out afresh, as in accordance with time-honoured custom, Ralph stooped down to imprint a salute on his old governess's cheek. "However, I don't think you are quite too much of a man yet. But see, the dear girls are anxious to get you in out of the cold, and we have made up a lovely fire in the schoolroom, if your papa will condescend to come up and take a cup of tea with us."

A general ascent was now made to the tower which had been set apart for the occupation of Miss Oliver and her pupils.

The Watch Tower stood on the edge of a deep ravine, at whose bottom a small stream ran half-hidden by the trees, and revealing its presence only by a perpetual tinkle over its stony bed. The schoolroom in its highest story was wainscotted with black oak, whose polished surface reflected the fitful beams from the wide hearth; and the round table before the fire was spread with a white cloth, on which tea and buttered toast were invitingly displayed. The tired travellers gathered

round the blaze, and while a ceaseless babble of information was being poured into their ears, Ralph, inattentive, went back in thought to Deerhurst Vicarage, to the face whose lips he had sealed that morning with a parting kiss, and which already—alas for the changeableness of human feeling!—appeared less lovely now that it was a remembrance only. Possibly comparison with the fair fresh faces of his sisters, faces which had an old-world look, as if they had been disgorged by the frames of the ancestral portraits in the gallery, was trying to the more commonplace style of Caroline. At all events, as the old home associations began to resume their sway, Ralph thought with growing dread of the disclosure he was about to make, and of the incompatibility of nature which, as he could not fail to recognise, sundered his earlier from his more recent friends. But he well knew that, till he had cleansed his bosom by confession, peace could not re-enter, and by dint of forcibly recalling the image of his deserted Caroline, weeping in the cheerless obscurity of her bedchamber, he succeeded after awhile in reviving his drooping enthusiasm, and his heart began to warm towards her with chivalrous and compassionate sympathy. He took heart in picturing to himself her first arrival at the Castle, her entrance, leaning gracefully upon his arm, his important position as her husband, her first introduction to Miss Oliver, and the pretty speeches of welcome with

which that lady would greet the blushing bride. Oh, that that day were but arrived, and the troubled billows that must first be crossed left safe behind! But wishes were unavailing. He must take the plunge, and to be battling with the waves would be more bearable than to linger shivering on the brink. A favourable first hearing he dared not look for, for though he resolutely blinded himself to the fact that Caroline was vulgar, and that hers was the hopeless vulgarity which, proceeding from the mind, becomes more palpably offensive when the brightness and grace of youth are passed, he could not help acknowledging in his heart that had her outward circumstances been ever so favourable she was not the wife his father would have chosen for his heir. Yes, a conflict was inevitable! he must bravely prepare to meet it, and as a first essential to success assume from the very beginning a tone of immovable resolve. He would demand on the score of his almost mature years the right, on such a point, to think and act for himself alone. Time enough afterwards to cry "peccavi," to ask forgiveness for the rash act from whose consequences honour forbade him to recede. Berkeley had time to think all these thoughts, and even to consider more definite plans, while Josceline, with his back to the fire, in what he considered an easy and majestic attitude, was entertaining his admiring audience with wonderful narrations of the practical jokes on their

fellow passengers, with which he and Berkeley had enlivened the tedium of their long winter journey. Finally, Miss Oliver, beginning to think the recital dangerous to the carefully guarded morals of her pupils, employed all the small amount of tact she possessed, and on which she valued herself not a little, in diverting public attention to less dubious topics.

"My love, the draught!" she exclaimed, as Philippa, standing at the snow-dashed window, gazed wistfully out at the reflection of candles, fire, and tea table, in the dark world beyond. "Let the curtains fall at once and come back to the table; you should know the bien séances too well to be running about the room when tea is ready."

"Who are the Bien séances, Olive?" enquired Philippa, her mind having long pondered in secret the mystery of these oft-appealed-to tutelary deities of the schoolroom. "Were they some very good pupils you had before you came to us? I know you always tell us all the children you used to teach were much better than we are, but the Bien séances must have been the best of all, because you so often wish we behaved like them."

"The bien séances are not children at all," explained her brother, who, perched on the fire-guard, was swinging his legs luxuriously, "but merely a large code of movable regulations, which being perfectly intangible, and indeed existing only as the creation of Miss



Oliver's brain, may be conveniently made to include any actions of yours which annoy her in the category of punishable offences."

"Oh you bad Lord Berkeley to tease me so! just as bad as ever, I fear. There, take your tea-cup by the fire and get warm. What a day for the poor dear little Queen! How she will suffer from cold feet, and the poor Princesses too!"

"The Queen, Miss Oliver! Why what is Her Majesty up to to-day?"

"Oh, don't you know? the journey to Osborne was to be this afternoon," replied the old lady, astonished at his benighted ignorance of the Royal proceedings. Miss Oliver was one of those disinterested persons who are able to indemnify themselves for the personal slights of fortune, by living in fancy with the great of the earth, and she would sit for hours contentedly picturing to herself dinner-parties at Buckingham Palace, filling in by the power of imagination the bare outlines furnished by the *Court Journal*, the cherished companion of her leisure hours, lavishing prodigal sympathy on the griefs, joys, marriages, and catarrhs, of persons whom she neither knew nor had any chance of knowing, and hailing with tears of admiring rapture any approach in their illustrious minds to the ordinary emotions of human kind. Ralph was well acquainted with the kind old lady's little weakness, and he seldom returned home for the holidays without bringing her some portrait

of infant royalty to glut her eyes withal; an opportunity which Josceline utilised on the present occasion for a long Republican tirade, of which Miss Oliver comprehended little, and heeded less. While he was occupied in an elaborate calculation of the expense of keeping up the Throne, and the useful purposes to which the Civil List money might be appropriated, the old lady amused herself by making *sotto voce*, a series of satirical comments on the famous proverb about "Queen's weather," and audibly revelled in the thought that at this very moment her Sovereign Lady might be sitting down to enjoy a hot cup of tea, just as she was herself.

Suddenly a hand was laid on Ralph's arm, and looking up, he saw behind him the pleased face of Mr. Daubeny, his father's faithful friend and librarian, a man of an artistic meditative nature, and a refined and cultivated rather than powerful intellect. Mr. Daubeny had loved Lady Rotherhame with a feeling as near to passion as any of which he was capable, and after her death regarded it as his most sacred duty to teach her children to cherish her memory and follow in her footsteps. He was deeply attached also to Lord Rotherhame, though perhaps a little bit in awe of him.

Ralph sprang up as the chaplain came behind him, and seized his hand in both his own.

"You must have thought me very unkind

not to have come and welcomed you before, my dear old Ralph," said Mr. Daubeny; "but the fact is I was in the middle of a confirmation class with the maids. I suppose you are not sorry to be back in the old place once more."

"Well, I was only saying to my father as you came in, Mr. Daubeny, that if he don't soon set to work to patch it up we shall be having the whole house down about our ears. I know he hates change, but a few judicious repairs would only help to keep things as they are."

"I don't leave repairs alone because I hate change, Berkeley, but because it would be an expensive business, and money runs through my pocket as through a sieve."

"You spend too much on charity," said Josceline Carr, instructively. "Allow me to suggest that indiscriminate giving may be more injurious than not giving at all; charity degrades people by putting them under servile obligations. How much better it would be, my Lord, if instead of encouraging tramps and undoing the good work of the Mendicity Society, you were to appropriate your surplus funds to the providing of cheap mental food for the masses! At the present moment they are in a state of abject ignorance, not one in a thousand is aware, for instance, of the ascertained scientific truth that we are the descendants of apes. Why don't the clergy occupy themselves in preparing a

concise compendium of the latest discoveries of Darwin, Huxley and Co., in place of the effete and now generally discarded Church Catechism."

"What shall the new creed be?" said Lord Rotherhame, with a yawn. "'I believe in myself, the infallible interpreter of Truth, and in an arbitrary selection of contradictory professors.' A tolerably presumptuous assertion for the child of a monkey!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

And over all there hung a cloud of fear,  
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,  
And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,  
The place is haunted.

Hood.

DINNER was not till eight o'clock, and Josceline and Ralph, having nothing better to do in the meantime, yielded a gracious assent to the entreaties of the children that they would join them in a game of hide-and-seek. Circumstances were in a high degree favourable to such an amusement, for except in its few inhabited rooms, the big old Castle—all too big for its inmates—was shrouded in appalling darkness. With its strong chambers and its secret chambers, its chests that opened with springs, its tortuous passages, and underground cellars, the structure was one vast hiding place, and to traverse it after dark with the consciousness that anywhere and everywhere enemies were lurking, ready to pounce, was an undertaking to try the stoutest nerves. Josceline shut himself up with his party in the nursery, and Berkeley departed in a contrary direction to discharge the onerous duty of choosing hiding places for his allies. When they were all safely stowed away, he turned his steps towards the "Little John's Tower," in which were his

father's rooms. There was a malicious intent in his choice of this hiding place, for he well knew that secretly—his father was sternly opposed to the spreading of such mischievous notions—his sisters and the servants whispered that “Little John’s” was haunted. It was not altogether unnatural that such an idea should have risen, for in that tower were the rooms in which their terrible grandmother had lived and died. The children often recalled with shuddering the miserable occasions when they had been brought up to pay their respects to the formidable old lady, sitting in her stiff armchair, how they had stood before her, enduring her cold civility and scathing sarcasms, trembling equally before her smile or frown, and pitying from the depths of their hearts the lean, obsequious companion, whose lot it was to endure perpetual confinement in her oppressive presence. They had hardly dared to own, even to one another, how vast was the relief to them all, when at last Lady Rotherhame died, and they knew that their lives would no longer be darkened by the recurrence of those half-hours of restraint and fear. Until that day the Castle had never seemed, in the true sense, a *home* to them, and even after, peeping round the huge hatchment that obscured their nursery window, they had watched the funeral procession start towards the church with all its ghastly paraphernalia of upholsterer’s mourning, mutes, nodding plumes and

dry-eyed mourners, Lord Rotherhame's children could not fully realise their deliverance, till they had crept into the shrouded rooms, seen them lie open and empty, and watched the emancipated Miss Teskey depart in a fly for St. Dunstan's.

Lady Rotherhame's death had not been wholly unexpected, although in deference to her orders, its approach had been kept a secret from the household. Long before they had ventured to suggest to her the necessity of seeking medical advice, her attendants had noticed her rapid attenuation and failing powers, and when at last her condition could no longer be ignored, when she fell as she attempted to cross the room, and her eyes grew so dim that she could not see to feed herself, she still angrily repudiated the idea of danger, and, in speech that was fast growing indistinct, forbade them to call a doctor. At last, one dark Sunday afternoon, when the snow was falling, and the members of the household were either in church or snoring over their fires, Ralph had been surprised by a summons to his grandmother's presence. He found her in bed, propped up against her pillows, and it seemed to him that since he had last seen her, a month before, she had put on twenty years of age and wrinkles. Her grey locks streamed wildly over her shoulders, her lips were thin and blue, and her eyes starting from their sockets. She was rating the little group that surrounded

her in a voice sharp with the querulous agony of terror, and no one dared reply, for the gentlest word was sufficient to draw down upon the speaker a torrent of furious invective. The sound of her grandson's soft footfall caught the dying woman's ear; she uttered a spasmodic cry, clutched at his hand, and ground it in her own. Frightened, as if he were in the grasp of a demon, he tried to free himself, but with convulsive violence she dragged him down till his face touched her sharpened chin. Then she struggled to speak, but her utterance failed, and she poured into his ear a flood of unintelligible jargon. Suddenly she broke out into a frightful yell, pointed to the foot of the bed, and with dilated eyeballs seemed to stare at some object, unseen by all beside. His hand released, Ralph tried to escape, but his knees shook, and he would have fallen had not Mrs. Weedon, hurrying forward, caught him in her arms. As they half dragged, half carried him from the room, he saw his grandmother try to leap out of her bed, but she dropped back in helpless collapse, the death rattle sounding in her throat. Small wonder that the memory of that mortal conflict between an unreconciled, unrepenting soul, and the invincible King Death, should have left its mark on the boy's mind, that the act of dying was to him associated with ideas of horror and unrest, that for many months he was not able to pass the door of his grand-



mother's room without a revived memory, which almost sickened him, of her scared, despairing face! But now four years had passed, his nerves and health had been alike recruited, he was approaching manhood, was preparing for the University and marriage. It was high time to put away childish superstitions, and he determined this evening boldly to penetrate the ill-omened rooms. He sprang up the winding staircase with an unflinching step, which sounded presumptuously loud in the solemn silence of the empty tower. With instinctive repugnance he avoided the chamber where the unholy corpse had lain, and entered the Wardrobe Room which had been the late Countess's parlour. There was something indescribably oppressive and gloomy about this room, haunted as it was by memories of the dead, and dimly seen in the low light of the dull red fire. You could have fancied in the shadows that the circle of high-backed chairs was filled with silent forms, you could imagine the shriek of the wind against the rattling panes to be the cry of a shivering shut-out ghost. He felt half inclined to creep away to some more congenial hiding-place, but for very shame of his fears shut the door, and drew a chair towards the hearth. The minutes passed slowly and no one came. The Wardrobe Room was the last place to which his sisters would choose to venture after dark, and Ralph, with a sigh,

made up his mind to patient waiting. Thoughts of the past thronged busily upon him—thoughts of the hard, proud woman, who used to sit in the corner opposite, shuffling her cards with withered jewelled hands, and of the great black coffin that had stood on its tressels in the adjoining room. But, strange to say, the memory that came back to him most vividly was the face of a small African monkey, which had been his grandmother's only pet. He could fancy he saw it now, crouching on the back of her arm chair; its grinning countenance interwove itself with troublesome persistence among the flickering lights and shadows. He seemed to see it leap from its perch and hide itself in the obscurity of the corner where the oak chest stood, and then emerge with a frightful grimace to stare at him from beneath its hairy brows. With what agility it used to spring from table to chair, from the chest to its mistress's knee! how like a familiar spirit it had been in its vigilance, its cunning, its hatred, and its loathsome attentions! How it had licked its lips when she tasted the fiery spirits with which she had been wont to cheat the dulness of those last painful months, stealing her sugar and her stakes, giving a sly pull at the humble companion's thin grey hair, and grinning at her terror and her lady's cold amusement. Like a devil it had superintended and enlivened its mistress's downward course, and like a devil it had vanished with her when

she "went to her own place," and the stately old Castle knew her no more. He almost expected to feel it spring on his back, as it had once done, to his unspeakable terror, when he was a child, and he instinctively looked over his shoulder as if he should see behind him its black imp-face. How his grandmother had laughed that day—how the ape had gnashed its teeth and chattered!

"Ah—h—h—h!"

A cold hand closed round his throat.

Ralph got up, scarcely knowing what he did, and uttered a cry. He shook himself free with a cold sickness at his heart, and turned round. The fire had sunk lower and the room was very dark. There was nothing to be seen. But for those cold finger-prints upon his flesh he would have thought that it had all been a delusion. He strained his eyes into the dark recesses of the room, but a horror possessed him of again encountering that chilly touch, and he did not move from the rug on which he had taken up his station. He listened to the howling of the wind as it tore round the old towers—the winter wind which was driving the snow across the churchyard in a white cloud against the wall. He watched with a feverish intensity of longing for the sound of steps upon the stairs, for the opening of the door and the cheerful light of candles. The wind was forcing its way through the window-panes, and its rustling on the carpet sounded like the sweep

of skirts. He thought again of the monkey, and half-laughing at his folly, fancied that the cold sensation on his throat came from its short and hairy thumb.

Two or three red-hot coals fell suddenly from the grate, and in a moment the room was illuminated by a tremulous blaze. Impelled by instinctive curiosity Ralph's eyes travelled round. It seemed to him that *something* was crouching on the floor, beside the mirror—something like a great black animal, about to spring.

Was it a wild beast?—was it a man?—was it—for the figure had something like misshapen humanity about it—a big baboon? He bent low, hardly knowing what he did, till—as his gaze rested on it—the creature began to move, and with slow crawling motion to drag itself towards him. Then the face became horribly familiar, and he recognised, as in a bad dream, the features of Tibbetts, the long-lost murderer of Culpepper Heath!

“God, have mercy!”

\* \* \* \*

“Bless his heart, he’s hisself again already! Look up at me, boy. You’ve been a bit fainty like, but it’s all right now.” It was Granny that spoke, Granny Weedon, Ralph’s nurse, and his father’s before him, who was sponging his face with cold water. He had been taken into the adjoining room

where his grandmother had died, and he was lying on the big bed, while his father stood by his side chafing his hands. Ralph understood that he had fainted, and he started up ashamed, but the next moment giddiness overcame him, and he sank back upon the pillow.

"Do you feel better, my boy?" asked Lord Rotherhame, bending over him, and Ralph noticed a peculiar pallor on his face, and a startled look in his eye, as if he also had received a shock.

"Oh yes," he answered, "I shall be all right in a moment; you needn't be an atom uneasy about me, my father."

Lord Rotherhame said that he was glad, and smiled, but still with that scared look upon his face.

As Ralph's senses returned, memory also became clear. He looked at his father nervously.

"Did you go into the next room?" he asked.

"Into the next room!" burst in Granny with a needlessly loud laugh, "incurse he did, and there was you lying on the floor as if you were dead. Whatever had you been adoin'g? Frightenin' yourself in the dark, I s'pose, and fancyin' you seed bogies and all sorts."

Lord Rotherhame silenced her with an impatient gesture, and said in a grave, kind voice—

"What could have made you faint, my boy?"

Ralph looked at him solemnly, and then taking his hand drew him close and whispered in his ear. Granny listened with intent ears, but could catch nothing but Lord Rotherhame's reply.

"Oh, my dear Ralph, impossible!"

"It is true, upon my honour. You don't disbelieve me, do you?"

"I don't disbelieve you, certainly, but your imagination is strong, and it is certain that you must have been subject to an optical illusion. I heard you fall as I came upstairs, and went straight into the room. You were lying on the floor in a dead faint, and startled me to such a degree that I have not yet got over it."

"And was no one there but me?" asked Ralph, in the same hoarse whisper.

Lord Rotherhame paused one moment, and then in his clear, cold accents answered—

"Not a soul!"

"When I came in, and we began to move you," interpolated Granny, "you began calling out just as if you was out of yer senses: 'He's there, he's there,—stop him!' I think it must have been Mr. Josceline that disturbed you for he was outside speechifyin' and plaguein' me to let him in, and till that you had laid quiet as a baby. So my Lord says, 'Granny,' says he, 'just look round and see if there's anything been a frightenin' of him'

So I looks all round and his Lordship too,—we looks in every cupboard, hole and corner, the big wardrobe and all, and there warn't so much as a mouse to be glimpsed. So whatever frightened you it warn't nothing—may be you seed yourself in the glass, or your pa's coat hung up on the chair."

A cloud passed over Ralph's brow, a cloud of deep perplexity. He could not discredit the clear and positive assurances of his father and the old woman, and yet nothing that they could say shook his conviction that, in the body or out of the body, he had that evening seen the murderer face to face.

A little more conversation passed, in which Lord Rotherhame did what he could to reason him out of his conviction, and Granny, in her loudest tone, indulged in numerous anecdotes of ghostly appearances to people whom she knew, which subsequent research had proved to be imaginary.

Ralph listened in thoughtful silence. Presently the dressing gong was heard, faintly sounding from the far-off armoury, and, springing off the bed, he declared with sudden briskness that he was all right again, and would go and dress for dinner. His father accompanied him to the door of his room, and Granny shouted out to him as he went parting counsels to trust in Providence for the future, and not fear "ghosties and such like rubbitch."

"One thing you must remember," said Lord

Rotherhame, pausing ere he left him with his hand upon the handle, and speaking with a slight hesitation, "you know the trouble we have always had in this house from people spreading foolish stories of mysterious noises and apparitions—servants leaving, and the children making themselves ill with nervousness. You must be very careful not to let a word of this get about, or there will be a general panic and stampede."

Ralph nodded assent.

"But I hate the idea of your sleeping in that room," he said. "Won't you be persuaded to change it and come nearer to us?"

Lord Rotherhame laughed and shook his head.

"*Pas si bête*," he answered lightly. "No, I am of too tough a make to be the object of ghostly machinations."

Ralph entered his large, pleasant bedroom, which, brightly lit up by fire and candle-light, looked the essence of sober comfort. He threw himself back in an easy chair, and for a few minutes gave himself up to profound meditation. But, into the warmth and light, the memory of that dusky room and its inhabitant followed him coldly, and made his heart heavy with a nameless wonder and oppression.

Josceline came in ere long, ready dressed, and into his ear, as to a safe and sympathising confidant, Berkeley relieved himself by pouring his story. They discussed it to-



gether—Josceline showing an amount of interest which astonished Ralph when he remembered his loudly-expressed disbelief in the supernatural in all its orthodox manifestations. But he understood it, when after an interval of thought, Josceline revealed to him that he was inclined to believe he had actually seen the living Tibbetts. Ralph thought this suggestion much harder of credence than the alternative theory of his spiritual appearance, but when he met it by the reminder that no being of flesh and blood could have escaped his father's close search, Josceline staggered him by replying that Mrs. Weedon might be his accomplice, hiding him in the house for some evil purpose of her own, and that, as she aided Lord Rotherhame in his search, she might very easily have shielded Tibbetts from discovery. It was in vain that Ralph poured scorn on the bare notion of his old nurse being anything but the impersonation of virtue, and that he pointed out how absurdly incredible it was that she could be in league with the man who had taken her son's life. The more he talked, the more scornful his laugh, the more contradictory did Josceline become, the more firmly did he hold to his own indefensible theory.

"If all the people in London were to tell me that they had seen a ghost," he said deliberately, "I would believe them fools rather than credit their story. Fools, one is

familiar with in every day life, whereas ghosts are standing impossibilities—for how can the material take cognisance of the immaterial? And if you speak truthfully, and what you saw was no ghost, it must be the real man, and how could he by any possibility conceal himself in a room in which search was being made, except by the connivance of one of the seekers. I never have liked Mrs. Weedon, Ralph. I always thought her a hard, sly-looking old hag, and disliked her free-and-easy familiarity with you, and the cool way in which she walks in and out of your father's room, and makes herself at home with his drawers and his keys. Still, I don't say that I should have suspected her of any positive crime, if it had not been for the way in which she behaved just now. I was coming upstairs, you know, to look for you, and your father was with me. All of a sudden, down rushes Granny with her face grey with fright, and her eyes starting from her head—I thought she was in a fit. When she saw me she pulled up sharp and tried to draw a pleasant expression over her perturbed features. But your father, guessing from her manner, I suppose, that something was wrong, sprang upstairs like wild-fire. I was in a mortal funk myself, and was rushing after him, when I felt my coat tails clutched, and looking round, I saw the horrid old wretch hanging on to me as if for life."

"Don't call her names," interrupted Ralph,

"she is the jolliest, most faithful old thing possible."

"Well, I sang out to her to let me go, and she began hectoring me in the most impertinent manner, telling me to stay where I was and not to go and meddle with his Lordship's concerns. On that I quickly wrenched myself free, and was running up, when she began yelling at Lord Rotherhame like an infuriated cat, telling him to mind what he was about and to send the *boy*—nice, appropriate expression that—about his business."

"I never did!" exclaimed Ralph, too astonished to be grammatical.

"Well, I hadn't got to the door when out comes your father, ghastly pale, and quite out of breath, and in a sort of gasp tells me that I can't come in, and that I had better go back to the others.

"'But do tell me, what *is* up? I asked.'

"'Only that Ralph has fainted,' he answered, 'and must be kept quiet. Tell Granny to come up to him, will you, and quickly?'

"So I went and ordered her up, and she went, muttering something, curses I expect, all the way. You never saw anything like her! She must either have been mad or have had some deep stake in the matter."

"She was frightened about me, I suppose, poor old thing, it isn't likely if she knew an accomplice was in the room that she would have let my father in so quietly."

"She couldn't help herself, and no doubt

when she shrieked at him like that she thought he would come back and give the fellow a chance of escape. No doubt there are secret rooms and things of that sort which she knows of in the walls. Why is she always locking herself in there, I should like to know? Do you remember how we used to puzzle about that when I was with you for Christmas two years ago?"

"She always said she was airing my grandmother's dresses," returned Ralph.

"Likely they'd require it so often, isn't it? But look you, Berkeley, we'll find out somehow what she really does on those occasions before I leave this place. I smell a rat, and when I do that I'm a very ferret for getting at it."

Ralph laughed, but Josceline's suggestions coming upon the shock he had received left a disagreeable chill upon his heart.

When Lord Rotherhame had decided upon his mother's death to take possession of her suite of rooms, it had not surprised Ralph that he should court his foster-mother's presence, and that the old woman should come up on winter evenings to join her master and his big blood-hound Oscar in their after dinner vigils in the isolated tower. But he remembered now that her protracted visits in his father's absence had often perplexed him, and he thought with secret discomfort of the intimate acquaintance with all the secrets of the house, which, as custodian of the jewels

and family letters, and as her master's confidant she so largely possessed. It seemed impossible to doubt Granny, the faithful servant whose rough devotion he had believed in as firmly as he believed in the Bible, and if it had not been for the unusual excitement which he felt galvanising every nerve and tingling in his brain, Ralph would have put Josceline's suggestions from him with calm incredulity. But that wicked face haunted him—he could not shake off the impression it had produced, felt incapable of sober reason, and, as soon as Josceline gave him the chance, nervously changed the subject in the hope of restoring his brain to its rightful balance. “By the way,” he asked sharply, “what did you mean by making those insane remarks about Caroline Bradshaw in the carriage? What could have induced you to begin chaffing me on that subject—the most inconvenient and unfortunate that you could possibly have chosen!”

“Well, I thought it would be expedient to prepare your parent a little for the joyful surprise you have in store for him. Enchanted as he will doubtless be at the prospect of having the lovely Carry for a daughter-in-law, the good news might come on him a little startlingly, if hurled plump in his face. Now the ice has been broken, and it only remains for you to go in and win. All I wish is that your prize, when attained, would do you greater credit!”

“Please to remember that the lady you

allude to, is my future wife," returned Ralph, with an air of majesty that had in it something unconsciously comic. "Perhaps, before the evening's over, you may have to congratulate me on our acknowledged engagement, though I don't mean to provoke fate to a contrary action by expecting such good luck as that. Come along, the gong sounded at least five minutes ago."

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## CHAPTER IX.

It is the little rift within the lute,  
That, by-and-bye, will make the music mute,  
And ever widening, slowly silence all.

TENNISON.

Out with it boldly, truth loves open dealing.

SHAKESPEARE.

NINE o'clock had sounded in the silvery tones of an enamelled Louis Quatorze clock in the small, richly furnished room, in which Lord Rotherhame had been dining with his young guest and his two elder children. The servants had retired after setting the dessert upon the table, the waxlights shone clear on bright flowers and rare porcelain. The crimson walls and corners were shrouded in gloom, except where deep picture frames and massive golden salvers reflected back the light they caught from the table. Conversation, which had been gay and animated, was beginning to flag a little. Josceline, leaning back in his seat, descanted learnedly on the merits of his wine, meanwhile holding the generous fluid between his eye and the light with the critical frown of an acknowledged connoisseur. Lord Rotherhame, resting his cheek on his hand, listened abstractedly, and Lettice, to whom the arts of social intercourse were as yet untried mysteries, sat fair and grave at the head of the table. Berkeley, whose coming

confession weighed ever more heavily on his mind, was inwardly arranging his plan of action, and from time to time glanced up at the ancestral portraits on the walls with a secret wonder as to how his Caroline's would look among them. He mentally encircled her blonde head with a diamond coronet of unrivalled lustre, decked her wasp-like figure in glittering white satin, and surrounded her neck with flashing jewels. But all these flights of fancy failed to reassure him. He could not imagine that the silent company, who from their posts of observation on the walls, had for generations kept watch on their descendants, would tolerate such an intruder into their exclusive ranks, and as his eye fell on the portrait opposite his seat, whence the severe eye of his grandmother met his own with angry disapproval, he involuntarily looked down with an expression half regretful, half apologetic. With a sinking heart he thought of the impending struggle, and of the endless succession of misunderstandings and miserable family quarrels, in which faithfulness to his plighted word would probably involve him. Anxious and unhappy, he became however, the longer he pondered, ever more firmly convinced that his sole chance of overcoming opposition lay in immovable determination from the outset, and in letting his father understand at once that his ultimate union with Miss Bradshaw was an altogether inevitable necessity. He had intended to ask



for an interview when the rest of the party should have gone to bed, but owing to Josceline's contrivance an opportunity presented itself earlier, so early indeed that he felt himself scarcely prepared to embrace it.

"It is very dreadful to be obliged to tell a lady that we have had enough of her society," said Lord Rotherhame, laughing, "but, my dear Lettice, if you don't make a move, we shall have Mr. Murray-Carr breaking out into 'We won't go home till morning,' or something still more unsuited to your refined tastes."

"I beg your pardon, papa," replied Lettice, rising instantly with a grave docility which looked strange in the eyes of Miss Bradshaw's admirers.

Berkeley opened the door for his sister to pass out, and Josceline, thinking that Lord Rotherhame would like to be alone with his son, asked permission to break through the barbarous British custom of sitting on without the ladies, and followed her straightway to the drawing-room.

"Stay here, Ralph, my boy," said Lord Rotherhame, "it is unwontedly considerate of Josceline to leave us to ourselves. You and I have long arrears of talk to make up; let us draw in our chairs to the fire."

The secret on his mind made Berkeley feel awkward and self-conscious. He drew his chair opposite to Lord Rotherhame's, and nervously employed himself in tearing his

grape stalks to pieces. Seated there, face to face, with the fire-glow resting on their pale clear cut features, father and son looked curious reproductions of one another.

"Have you seen the *Times* to-night? Any war news, father dear?" asked Ralph with a desperate effort to appear at ease.

"Let politics alone," interrupted Lord Rotherhame. "I don't care to discuss such high matters with a raw schoolboy. Make haste, Ralph, and say something interesting."

"But father, it's impossible to say anything interesting to order."

"Is it, my Ralph? Then be uninteresting, if so you must. As for me, silence contents me to-night, for instead of lounging in a glaring coffee-room, watched by a vigilant Kellner who longs to add fresh items to his overgrown bill, I am on my own soil, warmed by the flaming boughs of my own elm, and opposite me sits my own boy, longer-nosed and longer-legged than ever, solemn as an owl, steady as old Time, a son that any father might be proud of. How have I managed to get on without you so long, I wonder?"

"Oh father, if you missed me, you know you had only your own perversity to thank for it! Why did you persist in sending me off to a tutor's? Why did you not do as I begged you, and take me with you? We might have travelled all over Europe together and talked every evening of our lives. I wish, I wish you had listened to me!"

"A pretty scarecrow you would have looked by this time, if I had, my boy. I have not so many treasures left me that I can afford to be careless of the remnant. You are more to me now than anybody in the world, Ralph, but I don't mean to tempt Providence by setting my heart too much upon you. Better enjoy you in safe moderation, than risk your total loss by making an idol of you! 'The Lord is a jealous God,'" he added, looking with sad, set eyes into the glowing coals; "if we cannot love Him best, He at all events takes care that we shall have no other gods to worship."

Ralph comprehended too well the bitterness that underlay these moody words to combat them by any platitudes, however pious. He merely bent down, quietly kissed the hand that his father had clenched in a momentary spasm of pain, and then sat silent.

"Well, Ralph," resumed Lord Rotherhame, after a pause, and he moved uneasily, as if to get away from a repugnant thought, "and what impression have you contrived to make on Mr. Bradshaw, eh? It's a queer thing that you and I never fall foul of one another, considering what a thorn in the flesh you have been to every preceptor you have had."

Ralph laughed nervously, and with forced composure replied that, with regard to his preceptor at all events, he had become quite a reformed character. Then leaning his head upon his hand, and gazing into the red, mys-

terious world of light and heat between the bars, as though he would draw some inspiration from its glowing depths, a kind of agony seized him. The act of confession, which was to pierce with a fresh wound an already bleeding heart, seemed to him an ordeal only less intolerable than the alternative of continuing longer to deceive. Without further delay this outflow of trustful tenderness, each expression of which pierced him like a sting, must be checked! But it was difficult, when his most passionate desire was to soften the blow to the utmost of his power, to remember policy, difficult to speak with the stern courage demanded by expediency, difficult to fly in the face of that worst fear, the fear of estranging his best beloved. The anxieties of his position were multiplied by what he knew of the peculiarities of his father's temperament. Perhaps Lord Rotherhame would not have spoken of his Creator with such carping cynicism, had he not been himself eminently a jealous man, prodigally lavish of affection to the rare few to whom he gave his heart, morbidly jealous in his exaction of a return. Ralph recognised this instinctively, though he could not have put his knowledge into words. Could he dare tell his father—his father who only a few minutes since had permitted such a confession of love to escape his usually reserved and silent lips—that his favourite son had already dethroned him from the first place in his heart to make way for such a rival as

Caroline Bradshaw? But it was useless folly to continue brooding over the aggravations of his case, and pressing his hand to his heart to quiet its sickening throbbing, he resolutely made up his mind to set about his work at once, and to begin by interesting his father in the family in general, and in Caroline in particular, before prejudice should have steeled him against belief in her attractions.

"Father," he began, emerging abruptly from his abstracted silence, "I wish you would come down at the beginning of next term, and prosecute your acquaintance with my tutor. You would be safe to get on well with him; he has a profound admiration for some of your parliamentary speeches, and is for ever asking me what you think on every subject under the sun. He is a Tory himself, you know, and has supported the party through thick and thin."

"A Tory? Scarcely one of my persuasion, I imagine!"

"Well, no—scarcely so old-fashioned in his notions as you are, perhaps. He is a very enlightened man," he went on, judging it expedient to enlarge on the sound common-sense and calm judgment of his future father-in-law, "with no extreme views—candid and charitable to his opponents, preserving the safe middle course between fanatical absolutism on the one hand, and Radical destructiveness on the other. He is a deep theologian

too, and his sermons are such as even you would find difficulty in following."

"An excellent thing that for his poor parishioners. It is always well to aim at elevating the masses, and to avoid pandering to the popular taste."

"Oh, a capital thing!" responded Ralph, too pre-occupied to perceive his father's satire. "Bradshaw is a popular man, too, in his public capacity, and never draws down ill-natured comments from the Church press—a great thing to say in these days of *odium theologicum*."

"Admirable character altogether! I fancy I can see the man. Safe, moderate in everything, sublimely removed from the passions and enthusiasms of mankind, keeping the exact *via media* between too much and too little belief, vice and virtue, heaven and hell. Prudent, never rashly in danger, nor vulgarly conspicuous. Your description takes me by storm, Ralph. He is safe to be a bishop."

"Indeed, I don't see why he shouldn't," returned Ralph, evidently pleased with the idea, and cheerfully ignoring his father's banter, "especially if your party comes back into office and you could lend him a helping hand. I see you are laughing at me, but indeed I know you cannot hold Mr. Bradshaw in such low estimation, or you would never have picked him out to prepare me for Christchurch."

"I have the highest opinion of him—less perhaps on account of the surpassing mediocrity which so excites your admiration, than because he is the first of your many tutors who has contrived to make you fond of him. Mrs. Bradshaw, too, has been very kind to you, hasn't she?"

"Wonderfully kind—I can't tell you half she did for me when I was laid up. The two young ladies of the family form an amusing contrast. Miss Anna is very solid and intellectual, she has studied Greek and political economy with her father."

"Wears spectacles," interrupted Lord Rotherhame, "and makes quotations—the Cornelia Blimber, I presume, of the establishment. And what does her contrast? Serve tables, and mix brimstone and treacle for the pupils?"

Ralph laughed scornfully.

"I assure you, father, that if you found your conceptions of private tutors on Dr. Blimber and Mr. Squeers, you will be somewhat wide of the mark. Caroline Bradshaw is a lovely girl. Fair and blue-eyed, with wavy flaxen hair and an absolutely perfect figure. She has pre-eminent social gifts, and a manner so fascinating that she is simply adored throughout the neighbourhood."

Lord Rotherhame laughed, but did not look particularly pleased at his son's enthusiastic eulogy.

"Well," he said, "as the family has shown

you so much kindness, we must ask them to come and pay us a visit at Easter, and you shall show them all the lions. You may ask Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw and a daughter—only I must stipulate that it shall be the political economist, not the beauty. It would not do to excite your sister's envy."

"Oh but, father, Caroline is just the very one who ought to come before all others. She was good to me as an angel all the time I was ill—nothing I can do will ever half repay her."

"Well, well, enough of her virtues for the present," interrupted Lord Rotherhame with impatience. "By-the-bye, Ralph, you must walk down to the Rectory with me to-morrow morning, and make the acquaintance of Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton—charming people, who are staying with the Bogles."

"But I have more to say about Caroline," persisted Berkeley, firmly, despite the fluttering of his heart. "You *must* listen to me a little longer. First, please to look at this and tell me if you don't think it pretty," and promptly drawing out his watch, he opened a chased gold locket on a tiny chain, and presented for his father's inspection a brilliantly tinted photograph of his betrothed, which did ample justice to her curly fringe, the languishing droop of her eyes, and the elaborate arrangement of lace and ribbons about her neck.

"Very pretty—so pretty, in fact, that I



think I shall despatch you elsewhere next term, my friend, out of reach of such dangerous attractions. I do not send you to Deerhurst Vicarage that you may learn to flirt, and make believe to be in love."

Ralph flushed angrily.

"It is far from make-believe, as you will find, father, when you hear that I am already engaged to Miss Bradshaw, and come this evening to ask, in both our names, your consent to our future marriage—her own parents' having been already granted."

Lord Rotherhame's face became impassible.

"So far, so good," he answered calmly. "But supposing that I should demur to this nice little arrangement?"

"I hope I should be able to remove your scruples, but supposing that, for the moment, unhappily impossible, I must frankly tell you, my dear father, that I could not ultimately allow your opposition to keep me from fulfilling my engagement when I am of age, and free to choose for myself. I can see that you are treating this affair lightly, but for myself I can only say that I was never more serious in my life."

Ralph flattered himself that he had delivered a highly effective speech, and glancing at his father's face, mysterious and imperturbable as ever, he awaited his reply with a certain self-approving confidence. The worst was out now, and his father had

neither stormed nor fainted. His heart began to beat more naturally.

"I am sorry to have given you the impression that I am inclined to treat the affair lightly," said Lord Rotherhame at last, in a low, grave voice. "I assure you that I regard quite as seriously as you can, the information that in the most important step of life you have not thought it worth your while to consult my wishes, or ask my sanction. If you had done this, or so much as thought of me as a necessary party to the conclusion of this *absurd* arrangement,"—here his cold tone melted for a moment into anger,—“I would at all events have given it my consideration. But as you have not, it remains for me to teach you that your father is a person not altogether unworthy to be taken into your calculations, if only as a necessary inconvenience. Now listen! I at once, absolutely, and for ever, forbid you to hold any further intercourse with this young lady. You will not return to Deerhurst, and I shall write this night to Mr. Bradshaw, to inform him that the *engagement*, as you call it, is irrevocably terminated.”

"Of course, sir, I cannot prevent you from writing anything you please, but Mr. Bradshaw will understand that I have nothing to do with the communication," said Ralph doggedly, and with a resentful frown.

"On the contrary," said his father in a raised voice, a dangerous light kindling in

his eyes, "I will make you sign a declaration of concurrence in my decision. I have always been indulgent to you," he added, in a voice which grew tremulous, in spite of all efforts to keep it coldly steady, "but this behaviour of yours has passed a joke. You have deceived me, made me of no account, ignored me. It is for the last time—you never shall again!"

"I never wish to," said Berkeley, awe-stricken by the deep anger that thrilled through his father's tone, "but in the present case I have lost the power of choice. I have pledged Caroline my word of honour."

"It is a pity you should have been so rash."

Ralph's alarm grew fast.

"Father, I fear I have behaved like a fool. I admit that I ought to have asked your permission before engaging myself, but, as you will say when you know all, I had without any conscious intention committed myself to so large an extent, that I was bound in honour to make the offer—and indeed you could not help liking and admiring my Caroline, when you come to know her. Don't be too hard on me for what I let slip in the hurry of the moment, but make allowance for my excitement, and for once, reconsider your decision. I am *very* sorry that I have displeased you."

"If you are *really* sorry—if your apology is anything more than a self-interested stroke

of policy—you can at once prove it to me. Write yourself, and put an end to this *liaison*.”

“It is impossible that I can give you such a proof as that. I am bound to Caroline by a solemn promise. I cannot break it.”

“We have discussed this enough,” interrupted Lord Rotherhame, rising suddenly with an unquiet look, as though his pent-up passion were ready to break loose. “Tomorrow I will speak with you again. But for the present, leave me, if you please.”

As Ralph, in obedience to this mandate, slowly left the dining-room, his ear was greeted by the sound of the bell ringing for evening prayers. But feeling too agitated and unhappy to endure the cross-questioning of Josceline, he stole quietly upstairs and shut himself into his own room. Could he have seen through the closed doors of the library to which his father had betaken himself, he would have felt yet more uneasy.

The old black oak room, with its Persian rugs, and rows of vellum volumes, here and there intersected by half-fading frescos, the rich fire-glow falling on the solitary figure by the table, would have made a striking picture. Lord Rotherhame sat with his face hidden in his hands; hands white and beautiful as a woman's, and trembling with an emotion which he could not altogether master. His favourite child's “treachery,” as he mentally termed it, had cut him to the quick. Scorn-

fully indifferent to the opinions and actions of the majority of his fellow creatures, he was jealously exacting with the few he loved. It was no light thing for him to bestow his heart—to bestow it, and to find it valued at less than the pleasure of an amour with a pretty half-bred girl, was a bitter insult added to a bitter injury. He was angry with himself for having, in the blind confidence of affection, laid himself open to such a disappointment—angry with Heaven, that it should for the second time permit him violently to be despoiled of the one remaining solace of his wretched life. He resolved, by revenge, to indemnify himself for these repeated wrongs. It would be a satisfaction—however poor—to refuse to take his Maker's harsh dealing with humble submission—a compensation to show his ungrateful child that he could not tread on him with impunity.

"If he doesn't love me," he muttered, all the slumbering imperiousness of his nature waking into wrath, "he at least shall fear me. I will force him to break his insolent promise, and to give me the obedience he has dared to deny."

At midnight that evening a letter was written by Lord Rotherhame to Mr. Bradshaw, courteous though resolute—a letter which distinctly declined the honour of all matrimonial connection with the house of Bradshaw, and concluded by announcing his son's instant removal from Deerhurst

Vicarage. A few lines on another sheet, written in Berkeley's name, and briefly declaring his acquiescence in his father's decision, were put aside to await his signature. It was soothing to Lord Rotherhame's pride that the fact of Berkeley's capitulation being simply due to his command, should be thus made patent to the Bradshaw understanding, and he determined, that when this necessary token of submission had been concluded, Ralph should have leave to write, and plead, his own excuses as best he could.

## CHAPTER X.

How green you are, and fresh in this old world.

SHAKESPEARE.

HER sojourn in Rotherhame Rectory had not been without its trials of temper for Geraldine Egerton. For three weeks past the female portion of the Bogle family had been labouring, early and late, at church decorations. Ellen and Mary—in a normal state of dampness, clamminess, and consequent neuralgia—worked on each day with aching backs, till the fading twilight was exchanged for a tallow dip, and even in their dreams were haunted by confusing visions of paste-board crosses, Greek monograms and mystic triangles, moving in bewildering intersections within their fast-closed eyelids. Miss Bartholomew, with fearfully unflagging energy, kept her fellow-workers up to the mark, drove them back to their needles whenever they paused for breath with the unsparing severity of an Egyptian task-master, and never permitted them to retire for meals till the bell had rung for a good twenty minutes, when stealing, famished, into the dining-room, the sight of a crummy cloth, despoiled butter-plate and emptied meat-dish, consoled them but insufficiently for Dr. Bogle's approving and facetious assurance

"that he wouldn't scold them this once for their naughty unpunctuality."

The 23rd of December came—the day fixed for the tenants' ball at the Castle. Precisely at seven o'clock—for the Doctor made a point of being rather before time than after, in spite of Robert's fashionable remonstrances—the carriage containing that detachment of the Rectory party which was to dine with Lord Rotherhame, made its start. The Doctor, Miss Barnes, Robert, Geraldine and her parents, were squeezed into a vehicle constructed to carry four, and inasmuch as Robert refused to let down either of the windows, and Miss Barnes's varied perfumes filled the air, breathing became a task of difficulty. Through the glass Geraldine looked out wistfully upon the moonlit wintry country, the tall gaunt trees sprinkled with lately fallen snow, the grass sparkling with silver rime, the sylvan forest-depths veiled in frosty mist. The carriage bowed smoothly along over the crisp hard ground, and she could not help wishing that the drive were to be twice as long, for the protracted evening in the big Castle with all the strange people seemed a formidable ordeal to her, fresh from the schoolroom, and she secretly longed for Gertrude, and for bed-time.

"So our little Geraldine is to come with us to-night," said the Archdeacon, violently freeing his arm from the encumbrance of the



Doctor's weight, and fondly patting her blooming cheek. "How is that, Diney? When were you promoted to take a place in the great world?"

"Oh, my dear," explained Mrs. Egerton, fancying she detected a shadow of reproach in his tone, "this of course is quite an exception to the general rule. It is but nice and kind for all to join in making a little gathering of this sort as nice and pleasant as they can. The poor dear farmers work so hard all the year round, that one is only too thankful when they get an opportunity of unbending, and I hope that they will make a really good dinner, and thoroughly enjoy themselves. I am sure, love, we ought not to grudge them any little pleasure."

The Archdeacon listened patiently to the round-about remarks by which his wife arrived at this inconsequent conclusion, and then humbly defended himself, "Indeed, Rosa, it is not from any ill-feeling to the farmers that I asked the reason of this little girl's coming out with us to a dinner party. I had no notion that you designed her appearance as a special treat to them."

"No, dear, but the fact was the inquisitive little chit got hold of our letter of invitation, and found that she was included, and she reminded me that the ball itself was an informal affair to which children are invited with their elders, and then you know 'the more the merrier,' and altogether I

thought she might as well have the treat, as we are away from home this Christmas, too!"

"Our party always dines first at the Castle before the ball," put in Alice Barnes in her cheerful, chirrupy tones, "to meet some of the grand tenants who are privileged to be more *en famille*, the Thompsons for instance, and Mr. Hodges, the oldest farmer on the estate. I pity poor Lady Lettice! She takes her dear mamma's place as hostess for the first time to-night."

"The one young housekeeper must help the other," said Dr. Bogle, turning jocosely on his sister-in-law. "Just as my Clara was ever wont to help his Mary," he added, in a tone of profound sentiment which would have effectually sealed all other lips, had not Robert at the moment desecrated the reverential silence with an unrestrained guffaw.

"Dear me, yes! I don't know what Lord Rotherhame 'll do to-night, without poor ma to take in. They used always to pair off together, and he'll feel quite at sea without her. No Countess for you either, pa—worse luck to it."

"Robert, how *can* you be so inconsiderate?" exclaimed Miss Barnes, while Geraldine, irresistibly tickled by the bathos of his coarse reminiscences, burst into a smothered fit of laughter, in which, in the very act of motioning her to silence, her

father joined himself, to his own utter consternation.

The carriage now rolled over the draw-bridge, and Geraldine was in all the agonies of dragging on her new gloves, which split at every pull, when it drew up under the shadow of the great portcullis. Her father gallantly led her up the steps, and as she ascended, leaning on his arm, she felt for the first time the proud consciousness of being a real young lady in his eyes. She would have felt yet prouder had she known how charming he thought her in her simple dress, with her white arching neck, her small head with its rich, yet simple plaits, and her blue eyes shining with innocent excitement.

In the Red Drawing-room a large party was assembled. It was a big old room, with crimson walls and hangings; its richly carved ceiling was painted and gilded in the Renaissance style, and about the stately furniture there was a certain stiff, palatial solemnity which betokened that at present the ladies of the family confined their presence rather to nurseries and schoolrooms than to apartments of ceremony. Ralph received his guests at the great folding-doors, and conducted them across the room, to the sofa where his sister sat listening with a wondering face to the noisy jokes of a bluff-faced old yeoman. Geraldine's bright eyes were searching busily for the master of the house as she followed her mother to her

hostess's presence, and she had still not given up hopes of descrying him in some distant corner when Mrs. Egerton, turning towards her, introduced her to his daughter.

Lettice Harold would have made a pretty study for Greuze or Gainsborough, as she sat entertaining her father's guests for the first time in her life. To Geraldine her slight figure looked pathetically small and youthful in her rich dress of white satin with its long floating train. Her little delicately-rounded cheeks had not yet lost their childish dimples, and were tinged with vivid rose colour, and the dark lashes which fringed her large drooping eyelids served to show by contrast the delicate ivory of her complexion. There was grace in every motion of the small head and slender neck, refinement in each feature of the classic oval face, a pensive gentleness in the liquid eyes. The Archdeacon, a staunch devotee of the fair sex, was altogether taken captive by his young hostess, and eagerly accepted the seat at her side which Mr. Hodges benevolently vacated in his interest. There was a mingling of fatherly tenderness in his chivalrous reverence for the beautiful young girl, and Lettice, reassured by his presence, brightened up palpably, and no longer cast anxious glances towards the door whence she had been watching for her father to appear.

"Miss Egerton, may I introduce Lord Fitzcharles," said Berkeley when he had con-

trived to dispose of his other guests. Mrs. Egerton he had consigned to the care of Josceline; the Misses Thompson and Hodges were all seated back to back on the several quarters of an unsociable settee, where, like the four allegorical figures that support the Albert Memorial, they preserved a stony and impenetrable silence. Miss Barnes flitted hither and thither, trying to supply her hostess's deficiencies and to set conversation going among a group of nervous old maids, who, in order to do honour to the great occasion, sat on the edges of their chairs, and rigidly avoiding all approach to animation, occasionally lisped out a few phrases of dreary elegance. Mrs. Hodges, a cheery-looking old lady, had got hold of Miss Oliver, with whom she was discussing the short-comings of servants, relating, in strong homely language, anecdotes about her own *ménage*, and bursting into chuckles which so extended her fat sides, that the old governess expected every moment to see the hooks of her majenta silk gown take final leave of the eyes.

Ralph, having got Miss Egerton off his hands, returned hurriedly to his post by the door in time to prevent the short-sighted Mr. Meules from shaking hands with a statue, and Geraldine, turning to bow to her new acquaintance, perceived at some yards' distance a tall, stout gentleman, with bold eyes of indescribable tint, a long drooping light moustache and well-clipped imperial. This

personage, rather to her amazement, stood immovable, ejaculating "How do?" with a nod of patronising encouragement, and holding out towards her two fingers, much as Ahasuerus might have extended his golden sceptre to the trembling Esther.

Geraldine was in the act of coming forward obediently to take them, when the thought struck her that it was scarcely worth her while to take so much trouble for the sake of touching a stranger's hand. So raising her blue eyes with a straightforward, rather wondering gaze, she stopped short, and stretched out her hand. Lord Fitzcharles knitted his brows, and seemed uncertain whether or no he should ignore her behaviour, so that for some awkward seconds the two stood opposite one another with extended arms. At last his lordship slowly advanced two steps, and, as though under compulsion, inserted a gloved finger into Geraldine's palm. Then drawing back towards the fire, and lifting his coat tails, he fixed her with a protracted stare, before whose unpleasant deliberation she was obliged to droop her eyelids, and which made her feel both angry and uncomfortable. Promptly turning her back, she crossed over to her mother, not feeling quite sure that she had not committed some *faux pas*, and signalised her first entry into social life by an awkward breach of decorum. Meanwhile Mr. Hodges, released from his one-sided dialogue with Lady

Lettice, passed over to where a group of athletic youths herded gregariously together, looking as if they would rather have been bargaining in the Corn Exchange or scouring the country after sly Reynard than talking civil platitudes in a great man's drawing-room, dispensed a joke among them in order to prove himself a person privileged to rouse the echoes of that august apartment, and then, moving on, approached Mrs. Thompson, the most magnificent personage in all the room. Mr. Hodges was a man of substance, but not all his opulence, nor his substantial housekeeping, could reconcile Mrs. Thompson to his broad accent and loud-voiced jocularly. She was a sharp-nosed woman, with crimped hair, discontented eyes, and a mouth slightly open. The only literature in which she ever indulged was a fashion-journal, sent on second-hand by Mrs. Hodges, but she regarded books as having nothing to do with ladylike culture, and spent all her spare time in working bead mats for bazaars. She visibly shuddered when Mr. Hodges approached her, and looked so depressed that the good-natured man thought it incumbent on him to try to cheer her up.

"What's wrong with you, Mrs. Thompson, ma'am? you look as if you was just landed from a Channel steamer." Lord Rotherham's entrance, amid a general rising and hush, saved the lady from the necessity of replying to this coarse pleasantry. He came

straight up to Mr. Hodges, apologised for his late appearance, and asked cordially after his rheumatism. The old man's rheumatism had for many years been an annual topic of discussion at the Castle, and was looked on by Lord Rotherhame as a special bounty of Providence to assist him in eking out his slender stock of conversational topics with his country neighbours.

With a haunting remembrance, which made her feel shy, of the look he had given to her when they had met in the Rectory drawing-room, Geraldine kept her eyes averted as their host made the round of the room, until at last he came close to her, and she saw him standing before her mother with that peculiar look of sensitive gravity which needs but a sympathetic word to transform it into brightness.

"It is very kind of you, Mrs. Egerton," he said, after a few moments' chat, in a slightly lowered voice, "to excuse the informality of our invitation, and come to-night. My poor little girl finds her duties as hostess rather onerous. This is her first appearance in that capacity."

This little confidence gave Mrs. Egerton a capital opportunity for approaching the tabooed topic of the late Countess, against any illusion to whom she had been solemnly warned by Dr. Bogle. She had a deeply-rooted belief that it was her peculiar mission to console the afflicted, and indeed past



successes justified her faith in her skill as a spiritual physician.

"Indeed, I shall be delighted to be of any use to her, my dear Lord Rotherhame," she replied in a low voice, instinct with significance and sympathy. "And she is the eldest, is she? such a sweet-looking creature? You must find her a comfort indeed?"

"The eldest of five," replied Lord Rotherhame, shying away instinctively from the idea her tone implied. "She is a very good girl."

"Ah, I was sure of it. And what is the age of your youngest?"

"Let me see. Cicely is between three and four."

"Pretty pet. I do so love a babe. Only three years—was it so recent?"

"Yes, she is quite a baby still," replied Lord Rotherhame, wilfully ignoring her meaning.

"Poor little darling! ah, she doesn't know her loss! I have heard, you know, all about your trouble. What a sweet creature *she* must have been."

"She was," returned Lord Rotherhame quietly, but as he spoke a strange, set look came into his eyes—a look which Mrs. Egerton caught, and which, to the unutterable relief of Geraldine, who was making agonised signals at her mother, put a timely end to her sympathetic investigations. Her mind however had grasped less clearly than her heart the suspicion that she had

touched on nerves too sensitive to bear the gentlest handling, and she told her husband afterwards in all good faith, how much she felt for "that charming, attractive-looking man," and how simply, in spite of all that Dr. Bogle had made out, she had got him to speak with her of his dear lost one.

Mrs. Egerton's sympathy, in truth, had always been so cordially received, that to be forcibly prevented from expressing it, was to her candid heart as unnatural as it was repugnant.

Dinner was now announced, and Lord Rotherhame was rising to lead Mrs. Egerton from the room, when a doleful cry arose from the mistress of the ceremonies.

"Oh, my card, my card! where is my card?"

"Your card, dear?" said her father, stopping short, "what do you mean?"

"My card, with the directions how all the people are to go in. Those boys have played me a trick—I know they have!" she went on in growing excitement. "Josceline, I *insist* that you give it back to me!"

Josceline tittered, but the all-important document was not forthcoming.

"Never mind the card," said Lord Rotherhame soothingly. "I daresay our kind friends will pardon any mistakes. Send in Miss Egerton with Lord Fitzcharles," he added in a lower key, "and let Mr. Hodges take you."

At this point Josceline, in fits of smothered laughter, produced the missing list from the interior of a vase, and Lettice, punishing him by a glance prophetic of future retribution, in a clerk-like voice directed her father to lead the way with Mrs. Egerton. Lord Rotherhame, with a hasty intimation to Ralph to stay by his sister, complied with her command. But his verbal direction to Lettice did not tally with her written instructions, and between the two she soon found herself in a hopeless muddle.

"Lord Fitzcharles," she continued solemnly, when Dr. Bogle had borne off Mrs. Hodges, "Mrs. Thompson. No, stop please! Miss Egerton, I mean!"

Mrs. Thompson, who was gracefully stepping forward to take his lordship's proffered arm, looked rather grim at this awkward change, and yet more grim when Mrs. Eusty, a very inferior personage indeed, was next called on to precede her into the dining-room. The procession took a long time forming. Something was evidently wrong somewhere, and Lord Rotherhame and Mrs. Egerton were quite weary of waiting by the time that Lettice at last appeared led by Mr. Hodges.

"Papa!" she exclaimed in a tone of helpless dismay, "what *are* we to do? I tried to do as you told me, and it has put the arrangement all wrong, and now Mrs. Thompson is left behind with no gentleman to take her in!"

Poor Mrs. Thompson! what had she not

gone through, as sitting abandoned on her solitary sofa! She had seen both her own daughters, all the Misses Hodges, even "that whipper-snapper," Sarah Ann Eusty, marshalled in before her. Her uneasy smile lingered till the last couple had vanished, and then—left alone in the drawing-room—her fury could no longer be kept in bounds. She would order her carriage! she would never more return to the house where she had received such an insult! Her fingers were actually clutching the bell-rope, when the sudden appearance of her host in the doorway made her draw back, and convulsed her perturbed features afresh with a spasm of tortured smiles.

"Mrs. Thompson, I am beyond measure distressed at my daughter's dreadful mistake. She is so young and inexperienced that I am sure you will forgive her! Will you take my arm?"

## CHAPTER XI.

The churl in spirit, howe'er he veil  
His want in forms, for fashion's sake,  
Will let his coltish nature break  
At seasons through the gilded pale.

TENNYSON.

A brittle glass that's broken presently.

SHAKESPEARE.

DINNER was served on a dais at the upper end of the Great Hall—a knightly banqueting room, from the black cross beams of whose vaulted roof tattered banners drooped solemnly, and whose walls, hung with rows of grinning casques, stags' antlers, and ancestral quarterings, recalled past glories of tournament and chase. There was a vault-like chill in the air, which the huge fires that roared at either extremity failed to dissipate, and the blustering night-wind found a ready ingress through the ill-fitting casements of the seven tall painted windows. A grave company of hounds gathered round the hearth—a more stately group by far than the file of powdered footmen who seemed conscious of nothing but their calves—and looked up at their master's entrance, turning their eyes back upon the blaze when he had passed them, with a kind of regal indifference to the strangers that followed in his wake. Geraldine found herself seated at the long table

on an oak chair of ponderous proportions, on her right hand Lord Fitzcharles, on her left, Raven, Mrs. Thompson's son and heir, a young lieutenant in the St. Dunstan's militia, who bore his newly-acquired honours with something of a swagger. Geraldine herself was as yet scarcely at ease under the novel honours of grown-up young ladyhood, and the consciousness of her social inexperience hung heavily upon her. She made herself humbly agreeable to whichever of her neighbours took the trouble to address her, and bore without resentment the air of patronising familiarity, with which Lord Fitzcharles thought fit to regale the "pert little miss, who came with the parson's lot." Lord Fitzcharles, with more conceit than perception, generally set down everyone *he* did not know to be a "nobody," and, consistently with the polite fiction, trampled on them without remorse. The fact that Geraldine made her appearance at the Castle under the plebeian wing of Dr. Bogle of course sealed her social damnation in his lordship's esteem, and although compelled to lend her the aid of his aristocratic arm on her way to dinner, he judged it by no means necessary during the meal to don his best manners for her entertainment. The principal attention he offered her during the first four courses, was briefly to warn her when any special delicacy was coming round, of whose Parisian superiority she in the ignorance of provincial life might

probably be ignorant. With these galling civilities she would gladly have dispensed—she would also have preferred that he should not address her as “Miss Bogle,” catechise her on the internal arrangements of the Rotherhame national school, yawn when she spoke to him, or talk across her to her neighbour. At last, however, a humorous hunting anecdote by Mr. Hodges mercifully distracted his attention, and she was able to open a conversation with Lieutenant Thompson, who with his fierce eyes and thick moustaches looked quite a military hero, who received her overtures with eager gratitude, and treated her to an avalanche of fashionable chit-chat about the balls he frequented, and the love-affairs and mess-room bon-mots of his brother officers.

Lord Fitzcharles meanwhile benevolently devoted himself to the entertainment of the tenantry, who greeted all his sayings with such appreciative laughter, that he soon grew quite brilliant, and perpetrated many jokes of the rather dubious order of wit which finds favour at school treats and those other benevolent occasions when the great of the earth magnificently dispense plum cake and gooseberry pies to their humble brethren, and awkwardly try to remember that they also are human. At last, however, he had bestowed all the praises on the wine and turkey that he could devise, and exhausted every theme on which he thought he could

make himself intelligible to his hearers—a task, in his opinion, by no means easy, to judge by the loudness of his voice and the laborious distinctness of his enunciation. In the pause which succeeded, he overheard Geraldine discussing with the Lieutenant some friends of her father—county magnates of Northshire whom Raven had chanced to meet at a review, and at whose house Lord Fitzcharles had himself occasionally visited. He instantly made up his mind that “little Miss Nobody,” was trying to impress her companion by “talking big,” and he promptly resolved to take the conceit out of her and reduce her to her proper level. She must not be permitted to delude even Raven Thompson into the idea that she possessed such a measure of equality with a peer of the realm, as was implied by their mutual friendship with Sir Francis and Lady Devereux.

“Charming!” he began, breaking in with an artful sympathy on a vivacious description she was giving of the harvest-home in her father’s parish, with its attendant delights of vast plum-puddings, fireworks and unlimited merry making, “Charming, Miss Bogle! You and your friends seem to have capital fun among yourselves, and are far more lively than *we* are in our London balls and routs. I have often thought that our circles would be all the better for being inoculated with a little more of your free-and-easy joviality.”

Geraldine looked puzzled.



"Do you belong to such a very dull set then?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

"Dull? Well, perhaps you and your friend on the left might think so. Statesmen, ambassadors, and such like old fogies, would not be much after your taste, I imagine."

"Well, of course I cannot answer for Mr. Thompson," she answered, still not comprehending his drift, "but for myself, I have always fancied that I should like nothing in the world better than to know great people."

"Fond of knowing great people are you?" rejoined Lord Fitzcharles with a mollified smile. "I don't know that that pleasure might not disappoint you a little, after all. Our artificiality now, and our bondage to precedent and fashion, are great, though perhaps inevitable, drawbacks to our position."

"Are *you* a great man then?" asked Geraldine with an air of unflattering surprise, and a simplicity which Lord Fitzcharles could not help suspecting to be feigned. "Do please tell me what you are celebrated for."

He looked piqued and a little sulky.

"I'm afraid I can't lay claim to any particular intellectual distinction, if that's what you mean," he answered. "My name, I fear, is the most *celebrated* thing about me. But *apropos* of the sentiment to which you were confessing, you would do well, in my humble opinion, Miss Bogle, to put a strong curb on the propensity for 'great folks,' which is such a common weakness of young

ladies. It will only serve to put you out of conceit with your own friends, and incline you to turn the cold shoulder on the admirers who might make you good husbands, until at last you will end in losing your looks, grow old and plain, and find too late that the men will have nothing to say to you."

"Do you think then," said Geraldine, with a laugh half-amused, half contemptuous, "that because I take a natural interest in meeting a great author or a famous politician, I must necessarily be incapacitated for falling in love with an ordinary man?"

"I don't say that," he replied, looking at her with growing animosity, "but I *do* say that it is a pity for young ladies to encourage themselves in exalted notions, and to give in to a habit of thinking small-beer of the people they live among. I knew a little woman of the middle class once—an uncommonly clever, pretty little woman she was too! and might have married four or five times—but nothing would do for her but a sprig of aristocracy, and after hunting her game diligently from watering place to watering place for nine or ten years, she found out at last that they would not be caught, and retired from the chase an irredeemable old maid. I feel sure," he continued, significantly lowering his key, "that our friend on the left will thank me for giving you such sound advice. One can see with half an eye that you are making your impression there."

In spite of her youth and inexperience Geraldine was too quick-witted not to have discovered by this time, and angrily resented, Lord Fitzcharles's insolent drift. But accustomed to the ways and language of good breeding, she was so far taken aback that she could not at once frame a retort. Fixing her sparkling blue eyes on his face, she regarded him for a few moments steadily, and then spoke with a haughty curl of the lip and heightened colour. "The moral of your tale scarcely applies to me. I am not a 'little woman of the middle class,' neither am I setting my cap at you, as you appear to imagine, and when I speak of 'great people,' I do not mean people with titles."

Her outspoken scorn stirred up to its dregs all the pompous ill-nature latent in her adversary.

"I'm sure I had no idea I should cut you so, fair lady," he said, "by my use of the term 'middle class.' When I speak of the middle class, I don't mean merely the tradespeople and such like, I mean the intermediate class between them and the aristocracy, well, in fact, the gentry, the professional gentry, the landed gentry!" he added, seeing her indignation increase at every word, and delighting in the sport which the high-spirited girl afforded him.

"It strikes me," she said, carried beyond herself, "that you confound aristocracy with titles, Lord Fitzcharles, and gentility

with the capacity to keep a gig and pay rates and taxes. Take an English gentleman of long descent, or—better still, of highbred manners—put him by the side of some paltry new-made viscount, full of airs and self-consequence, and ask the world to decide which is the patrician of the two?”

An angry scowl darkened Lord Fitzcharles's brow. Her bow, drawn at a venture, had found out a weak point in his social armour. “Come, come, don't excite yourself,” he said with venomous emphasis. “I am quite of your opinion that it is a very fine thing to be a gentleman. I have known gentlemen in all classes of society; but, mark my words, it is one of their distinguishing characteristics that they *know their place*, and never try to push themselves out of its limits into the circle above them.”

“No circle is too high for a real gentleman to step into. Except as regards precedence, he is the equal of every one he meets from the Prince of Wales downwards.” Geraldine was growing desperate, but she kept up her courage to the last.

The voice of Lord Rotherhame fell gratefully upon her ear, as he bent forward to the disputants, whose raised voices had reached him at the bottom of the table, and whose inward exasperation was now barely covered with the thinnest varnish of civility. “You are in a hopeless case, Fitzcharles,” he said, “your theories will not stand before Miss

Egerton's facts. I am quite of your opinion," he went on, looking at her with a smile, "the difference between our titled and untitled aristocracy is one merely of degree. The untitled aristocracy of England is one of the proudest in the world, and most of our oldest pedigrees are to be found out of the Peerage, if we except a few of the great historic families, such as the Courtenays, Howards and Talbots"—

"And Harolds!" burst in Geraldine with enthusiastic gratitude.

Lord Rotherhame acknowledged the compliment with a bow and amused smile. He was not a little diverted by the outspokenness of the beautiful young girl, whose youth and inexperience appealed to his chivalrous instinct, and it gave him hearty satisfaction to see that Lord Fitzcharles—whom he would willingly have kicked down stairs for the manner in which he had traded on her social ignorance—should, in tackling what he thought to be a Greenlander, have caught a Tartar instead.

Lord Fitzcharles was a little ashamed that he had exposed his natural vulgarity before so well bred a man as his host, but he felt himself in honour bound to show a little fight. "Of course," he said in an explanatory tone, "by the aristocracy I meant the Peerage. I was not disputing that there are many fine pedigrees among the gentry, but antiquity of family was not our point."

"As a matter of fact," rejoined Lord Rotherhame, "there are but two great divisions of society, all lesser distinctions being arbitrary and artificial. No amount of peerages, nor of ancestors either, for the matter of that, can make a gentleman, nor can the humblest employment unmake one. And now, Fitzcharles," he added with a sudden access of impatience, "spare Miss Egerton any more of your Philistine notions, and redeem your character with her by making yourself amusing."

If there was a person on earth of whom Lord Fitzcharles stood in awe, it was Lord Rotherhame. Himself of a mushroom race, which had been ennobled forty years previously in reward for a successful series of commercial speculations, nothing pleased him better than to hob-nob with a brother peer, whose blood would have been blue from age alone, and by means of a certain vein of humour, and of that delicate flattery which consists in the diligent falling in with another's moods and peculiarities, he contrived to make himself so agreeable to Lord Rotherhame, that his ill-breeding was condoned, and he became one of the very few guests whose presence was tolerated in the inhospitable old Castle. "If I were rich enough," Lord Rotherhame would sometimes say laughingly, "I would indulge in half-a-dozen toadies. There is nothing more important than to be kept in a good humour with

oneself, and a good toady will do that satisfactorily enough, for we are apt to be credulous on the subject of our own attractions. And in spite of the odium attaching to the calling, they are not such a bad lot after all, as the world goes. They earn their bread at least as honourably as three-fourths of their fellow-men, and your genuine toady seldom makes an ill-natured remark, which is something to his credit—even though his forbearance has no motive more respectable than the policy of self-interest.” That his friend Fitzcharles could lay no claim to the latter qualifying merit, Lord Rotherhame was well aware. But then Fitzcharles was no common parasite, and might safely afford himself the luxury of making merry at his neighbour’s expense. His dread of Lord Rotherhame’s sarcasms, nevertheless, exercised a wholesome restraint over him, and he had never before suffered the cloven-foot to peep forth in his presence so perceptibly as on the present occasion. He accordingly swallowed his snub with a fair grace, affected to treat his passage-at-arms with Miss Egerton as a very good joke, and took care for the remainder of the meal to confine his attention to his neighbour on the other side.

Mrs. Egerton, meanwhile, anxious to change the conversation, began praising the parish church.

“My husband was so particularly pleased with the way in which you are doing it up,”

she said, "and usually he doesn't half like restorations."

"The church owes a good deal to my ancestors," said Lord Rotherhame, smiling.

"One might almost say it is the fruit of their transgressions, for whenever they did anything abnormally bad, they used to make amends to Providence by building a new chapel or presenting a fresh treasure to the sacristy. Analogy would set me down as the worst offender of the lot, for I believe I have done more for it than any one of them."

"But the thing that especially interests *me* about it, and I am sorry to say comes into my mind even during the prayers, when I should be thinking of something very different, is the puzzle as to how that poor wretched creature can have contrived to hide himself from the police—you know whom I mean, the man that did the murder on the heath here. Do you know, this morning, while good Mr. Meules was reading that beautiful chapter about Elisha and the bears, so full of warning and instruction to the young people of this generation, it flashed across me—don't tell my husband of my naughtiness—that he might possibly have got up into the roof. It is high and dark, you remember, full of crossbeams and curious arches, and he might have scrambled up somehow and hidden himself."

"The interval between his entering the



church and the police following him was almost too short to allow of that," returned Lord Rotherhame, "and, on the whole, in these days when we are being despoiled of so many of our time-honoured mysteries, I am not sorry that one should linger on here to console us."

"Ah," said Mrs. Egerton with a wise shake of the head, "it is a mystery that the Last Day alone will disclose!"

"If the Archdeacon is fond of curiosities, Mrs. Egerton," said Lord Rotherhame a little abruptly, "here is something that I think he would admire," and he took from the butler's hand an exquisite goblet of thin old glass, of pale red colour and rare design. "This," regarding it lovingly, "has been in our family between three and four hundred years. It was given by Henry VII. to his sister, who married an ancestor of mine, and has been handed down as an heirloom ever since. That chip was made when it was stowed away in the cellars during a siege of the Castle by the Roundheads, but otherwise, you see, it carries its years well."

"It is indeed a gem, and apart from its historic interest, must be of value merely as a work of art. Pray let my husband see it. I am sure it will delight his heart."

The goblet accordingly travelled to the Archdeacon, who, after admiringly detaining it for some minutes, and giving a little exposition of its merits, sent it the round of the

table—the surprise on the faces of the company at being called upon to belaud such a faded specimen of *vertu*, equalling the admiration of their words. At last it reached Geraldine, who, after bestowing on it a brief examination, was obliged to pass it on to Lord Fitzcharles. She wished to do this in a way which should make him feel that she had not forgiven him, and pushing it towards him without looking round, she gaily continued her conversation with Lieutenant Thompson.

Horror of horrors! The fragile glass struck against her tumbler, and the next moment she felt it shivering to pieces in her hand. Her first wild idea was concealment, but Lord Fitzcharles's sarcastic, unpitying eye was upon her. Exposure was inevitable. In an instant dead silence reigned. Geraldine dared not lift her eyes, dared not so much as think of Lord Rotherhame. Her mother was in the act of breaking the awful stillness with an anguished apology, when Dr. Bogle forestalled her in his most rasping tones.

"How could you think of being so careless, Geraldine? Are you aware that you have destroyed one of his Lordship's most cherished treasures? You ought to look what you are about!"

"Confound the fellow's impudence!" muttered Berkeley, savagely. "It is a good thing that old cup has received the *coup de grace*," he added, in a louder key, "it has always

kept the whole family in a state of fidget, and has given us all more pain than pleasure."

This well meant attempt at consolation did not much encourage poor Geraldine. Her lip quivered, and when Lord Rotherhame assured her with kind earnestness that there were worse troubles at sea, that glass must get broken sooner or later, &c., &c., the tears poured from her eyes in a blinding rush.

"My dear Miss Egerton!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame in a tone almost caressing in its gentleness, "it is really unnecessary to take a little accident like this to heart. If you only knew how little I really care about it! But the fragments must be collected and carefully preserved, in remembrance of the auspicious occasion when you first honoured us with your presence."

Geraldine struggled desperately to speak, and at last contrived to master her voice sufficiently to falter out—

"Oh, but I know it can never be replaced. I heard you tell my mother how precious it was to you."

"I *liked* it, certainly, but you must do me the compliment to believe that at my mature age I am not quite such a novice in life as to allow myself to be afflicted by the loss of a glass cup. Take up the pieces, Wentworth," he added, with a glance of involuntary anxiety towards the melancholy fragments. "And now, Mrs. Egerton, what wine will you take?"

Later in the evening, when, after a rather tedious interval, whiled away in the inspection of anonymous photographs, the gentlemen at last rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, Geraldine slipped round to her father to consult with him on a scheme of reparation which she had been anxiously maturing.

"Father," she whispered, "here, you see, is my own curiosity, the pearl ring which Aunt Augusta gave me, and which she always told me was given to her grandmother by the great Duke of Marlborough. Mightn't it a wee bit help to make up to Lord Rotherhame for the beautiful thing that I destroyed? He *was* so kind to me about it. Do go and persuade him to take it—it will at least help to show him how ashamed and miserable I feel."

"Well, you must do as you please about it," returned the Archdeacon, a little dubiously, for although he sympathised with her desire to make atonement, he could not bring himself to part from the treasured relic without a pang.

Geraldine, however, welcomed his permission with such eager gratitude, that he could do no less than agree to act as her ambassador, and convey her peace-offering to their host. He found Lord Rotherhame talking to Mr. Woodman, his little golden-haired son upon his knee.

"I come from my daughter," he said with an involuntary smile, and in a low voice explained his errand.

"Is it not too valuable?" asked Lord Rotherhame, holding the trinket in his fingers tenderly, as if it were a sacred thing. "May I take it?"

"Pray by all means do so. It will do much to console her for her deplorable mishap, the thought of which is weighing very heavily upon her."

"If that is the case, I will, most certainly. Where shall I find her?" and discovering her whereabouts with a rapid glance, Lord Rotherhame put down the child, and quickly crossed the room. Geraldine, seated on a sofa beside Miss Thompson, glanced up nervously at his approach.

On the little finger of his right hand she saw her ring—the corresponding finger on the left was simply encircled with a plain gold band.

"A thousand thanks for your beautiful present," he said, glancing with amusement at her bashful face, "you have repaid me fourfold the value of my damaged glass. What could have put such a generous thought into your head?"

"I know you like curiosities," she began, in hesitating accents, and blushing deeply.

"And expected me instantly to consign your gift to a private museum redolent of dust and camphor, to the unsympathetic companionship of Roman coins and fossil fishes? No—a ring is the symbol of friendship—and as such, and such alone, I accept it from you."

Geraldine looked up, and shed a warm smile upon him from the depths of her shy, blue eyes.

"I was afraid you would not be able really to forgive my dreadful awkwardness," she said—wishing, yet not altogether liking—to accept his interpretation of her action.

"Who could be angry with you?" he answered, almost tenderly, taking the hand she extended to him. "One might as well lose one's temper with a kitten. Young things must be a little bit foolish at times, and if you chose to take that particular method of venting your displeasure on the gentleman who had offended you, I, on whose responsibility you were burdened with so uncongenial a partner, am the last person who has a right to complain."

"How *can* you know that I was thinking of Lord Fitzcharles when I did that?" she asked with unfeigned wonder.

"Wouldn't you like me to tell you?" he answered laughing. "I must reveal to you for your satisfaction, by-the-bye, that I have been giving Lord Fitzcharles a very serious talking to, and have thoroughly brought him to his senses. You will be having him on his knees before you presently."

"He took me for a kind of kitchen maid, I think," returned Geraldine, resentment once more reviving with remembrance.

"*Tant pis pour lui*, and for his character as a man of the world," replied her host. "But

see, I have an offering for you in my turn. I wear your ring, and you my flowers," and he placed in her hand an exquisite bouquet of white and scarlet blooms. "Will you come and have some coffee now? and then I think we must begin to dance."

In the tea-room Geraldine found the last detachment of the Rectory party huddling together for mutual protection on a modest sofa in the corner—Gertrude, the Bogle girls, and their two governesses, all looking equally dejected. The pale, heavy features of Ellen Rotherhame and Mary Philippa were convulsed by tortured smiles as they spasmodically struggled to respond to the laborious courtesies by which Ralph and Josceline were endeavouring to raise their drooping spirits. Nina, having been brought out to enjoy herself, tried dutifully to imagine that she was so doing, despite which pleasing delusion, however, she did not succeed in looking very cheerful, and Miss Bartholomew's severe countenance—a living condensation of the sad wisdom of the Book of Ecclesiastes—remained a standing rebuke to the frivolity of the scene enacting around.

By this time the tables in the dining-hall had been cleared away, the band had taken their place, and the first notes of the "Lancers" heard from afar summoned the male portion of the company to provide themselves with partners. Lord Rotherhame and Mrs. Thompson speedily placed themselves in the

centre of the hall, and opposite them stood a jovial couple—Mr. Hodges, who after sundry sturdy refusals to dance on the score of a gouty leg, had been captured, leg and all, by Mrs. Egerton, and who now stood by her side, grinning from ear to ear a grin of patriarchal benevolence. Similar pressure had been used with the Archdeacon, who, holding Miss Barnes's hand and preparing his steps with extreme precision, looked such a fine, graceful figure in his buckles and black silk stockings that it would have been a thousand pities had clerical scruples prevented his joining in the dance. The Doctor's conscience, however, was of too stiff a texture to accommodate itself to any such breach of priestly etiquette, and he retired with his eldest girl to a window recess, where he sat, grunting disapproval, and watching the Archidiaconal performance with a scathing glare.

Geraldine was not much in the mood for dancing. Her eyes were still reddened, and she could by no means forget the miserable episode of the broken glass. Berkeley, her first partner, guessing on what theme her thoughts were running, tried hard to divert them into another channel, and mentally cursed Lord Fitzcharles who was in the next set, and whose frequent approaches, necessitated by the dance, constantly recalled to her her fatal blunder. The room meanwhile filled rapidly, and Mr. Daubeney did the re-



ception honours with a face whose shyness approached to agony.

"Do look at poor Mr. Daubeny," said Berkeley laughing, "could you conceive a being more out of place? dropped suddenly from the third heaven into a ball-room, and compelled to exchange the converse of the saints for the task of forcing unwilling young gentlemen to cease herding together, and to pair off with hostile young ladies."

"He has to use strong pressure," returned Geraldine, watching with amusement Mr. Daubeny's polite smile change to tortured embarrassment as the Messrs. Budden, three sturdy-looking youths, refused to dance in the face of their proposed partners. Their unwillingness was excusable enough, for being at the hobbledehoy stage of existence, when arms and legs seem only unmanageable encumbrances whose single object is to attract scornful attention, they would have found it a formidable ordeal to have to skip round the hall beneath the eyes of the mammas assembled, who had set themselves to criticise the dancers as the only means of indemnifying themselves for their own advanced age.

"He is making an egregious mess of it," said Berkeley, shaking his head, "the Buddens are mere dirt in the eyes of the ladies to whom he has been introducing them. There are lots of people here who will only meet in our house and who will not know each other in the street. You have no notion

how careful one has to be. Now clergymen have no common sense—our Bishop got himself into hot water exactly as Mr. Daubeny is doing now. He was told that he ought to entertain the small gentry of the town, so what did he do but give an aldermanic dinner, at which he mixed up small professionals and big tradespeople in a mad medley of confusion. The entertainment was profuse to magnificence, but neither venison nor champagne availed to dissipate the deep melancholy that brooded over the guests. Next Sunday the dissenting chapels were full.”

“But see, Mr. Daubeny is cheering up,” interposed Geraldine, “one of the recalctrants seems to be relenting. The lady, however, continues to look wrathful, as if she would thank Mr. Daubeny to let her affairs alone, and confine himself to sermon-making in the future.”

“Her partner is Harry, Mr. Budden’s first-born—an adventurous youth, who saved an old woman from a mad bull at Michaelmas, and who accordingly, I suppose, does not think he need fear black looks from a young lady. His trips on the light fantastic toe usually prove to be of a destructive order—torn skirts, collisions, falls, broken noses, follow abundantly in his wake.”

Berkeley’s prophecy was literally fulfilled. Robert, who danced with an equal disregard of consequences, was not long before he encountered Mr. Budden in full career, and

with a shock and crash like meeting thunder clouds, the two couples immediately went down. Robert pulled himself up, looking daggers at his involuntary antagonist, but Harry Budden, with undisturbed good humour, did not even pause to apologise, and dragged the indignant Miss Woodman onward, regardless of her remonstrances and of the yards of torn tarlatane that floated in her rear. Nina Nutting was his next victim. The unfortunate maiden was gambolling in a corner with Percy Bogle, when a random shot from Harry's flying leg laid her prostrate. Nina, struggling to her feet, dizzy and half stunned, made moral capital of the event, by reflecting that had she been in the path of duty, no such mischance could have befallen her. A blow received at midnight in a ball-room was in truth no honourable scar for a member of the Guild of St. Etheldrida.

"How pleasant life might be," said Alice Barnes, looking about her with a smile of enjoyment, as she paced up and down on the Archdeacon's arm, "if one's conscience could permit one to put aside the idea that we are here, not for amusement, but for work. I often feel unhappy do you know, Archdeacon, to think how many hours and minutes of every day are wasted in trifles, and above all how little I actually do for the souls of others. My attempts are few, and, it seems to me, meet with no sort of real success—I

fear, through my own want of faith and love."

The Archdeacon looked at her, and his instinct, sharpened by habitual sympathy with his fellow-creatures, told him that she was in need of comfort.

"People," he said, "that is, people who think, are too eager about work now-a-days. It is the mania of the age. Some hero comes forward—by his sacrifices impels men to be good, or by his oratory persuades them. Another, destitute of the special gifts bestowed on him by heaven, tries laboriously to do the same, makes a fiasco, and refusing to accept from experience the assurance of his incapacity, conscientiously torments himself in a perpetual losing battle against nature. We should learn a lesson from earthly things. The tailor does not throw down his goose and rush out to command an army because soldiering is a higher work than sewing, nor does an honest groom expect the council of a public school to elect him as head-master. The spiritual life has its vocations as well as the social. To one it is given, in nursing religious or philanthropic communities to consecrate an otherwise untrammelled existence to the service of the race—to another, the rich cares of married life. To one, the gift of evangelisation, the nerve and the tact to preach and teach God to the masses—to another to reveal Him by a life of kindness and goodwill. Fragrance

enshrines Him as much as speech. Do not worry yourself because the work of converting others seems utterly against the grain of your nature. Content yourself with being like a flower, and spreading sweetness and brightness all around."

Miss Barnes's eyes brightened.

"But is there not some danger," she asked, "in such a doctrine? Would not many be only too eager to jump at the pretext of unfitness to shrink from all toil for others?"

"All truth is liable to abuse from frail human beings, and we certainly should be on our guard against a too ready assumption of personal incapacity for what involves some sacrifice. But I am sure the abandonment in certain instances of the actual work of spiritual evangelisation need lodge no one in a career of selfishness if St. Paul's grand standard is continually upheld, 'no one liveth to himself.' To go back to my old illustration—a flower does not bury its sweetness in itself, but diffuses to all who approach. Give freely of what you have, and do not distress yourself that you are without the particular faculty which you conceive God's cause in the world to need most urgently."

"But," returned Miss Barnes, with a troubled look, "it is dreadful to think that for want of a little more devotion on one's own part human souls should suffer endless loss."

“God forbid that such a thing should ever be!” returned the Archdeacon, earnestly. “He is not *unjust*, that He should let one perish through another’s fault or neglect. That would be to make our salvation depend upon each other, instead of on His own free love. If we fail to use the opportunities He gives us of serving others, the loss is ours, not theirs—the loss of that high honour which He confers in making us His fellow labourers. The reason why intercessory prayers should be one of a Christian’s daily occupations, is—not that our Father would keep back any imaginable blessing from some of His children, because others are negligent or unbelieving in asking, but that He loves to associate us with Himself in the work of our redemption—bidding us pray with Christ, toil with Christ, help Him in His sacraments; we bringing water, He the remission of sins; we giving bread and wine, He bestowing His own spiritual Presence. Try then, my dear child, to make your own particular individuality of use in its own way to your brother-men, be prepared for *any* sacrifice which—because forced on you by circumstances independent of yourself—is unmistakably God’s will, but do not stultify your energy by the paralyzing belief that on your uncertain effort depends the salvation of one single soul. Perfect love and perfect justice are the component gases of that spiritual atmosphere, without free respiration

of which the human soul must pine and sicken."

"Thank you warmly, Archdeacon," said Miss Barnes, in a low tone, and her companion saw that tears were standing in her eyes. "I confess that my mind has long been distracted by the thoughts I have briefly mentioned to you, but I believe you have thrown a light across my path. I wish I could always grasp, as I do at this moment, the true meaning of the phrase, 'God is good.'"

"Ah! therein is the sting of sin," answered the Archdeacon, "that it poisons our thoughts of Him. 'Thou thoughtest wickedly that I was even such an one as thyself.' Never, till it comprehends intelligently that God is good, will the world itself be cured of evil."

Between dancing, supper, and promenades in the cool cloistral passages, the hours flew by on wings of air. To Geraldine, who had never before assisted at a grown-up ball, it seemed a very fairy-land. Her programme had speedily been crowded with the names of Berkeley, Josceline, Raven Thompson and Robert Bogle; honours without end were showered upon her—Mr. Meules even wishing himself a layman that he might have the pleasure of supporting her through the polka—and Geraldine laughed merrily at the squabbles which raged between partners, who clamoured round her for dances of which she had already disposed. A valse with her host however was, to her fancy, *the* event of an

eventful evening. Lord Rotherhame looked almost too melancholy and dignified a person for such a frivolous pastime, but none the less did he dance with a grace that put her bachelor partners to shame. She found it just a little difficult to sustain conversation in the pauses—why, she hardly knew, unless it were, as his rather dreamy expression suggested, that his mind was not altogether in the scene enacting round him—the scene which to her was so entrancing. Once or twice, looking at him closely, she fancied she could detect, beneath the misleading sparkle of his apparent gaiety, the secret sadness of a solitary heart.

At about two o'clock the Rectory carriage came round to bear away the first half of the Doctor's party. The Archdeacon, being very sleepy, volunteered to escort his own daughter, with the younger Bogles, home. Geraldine, although her head was splitting from the effects of the excitement she had gone through, felt loath to leave the brilliant ballroom and her pleasant partners. But the decree had gone forth, and she had no choice but to resist Mr. Murray-Carr's entreaties for one last valse, bid adieu to the enchanting revel of music, flowers and light, and follow the Bogles into the hall. A powerful escort accompanied them—Lord Rotherhame, the Doctor, Josceline and Berkeley—and it was fortunate for Geraldine that she could steady herself on the strong arm of Josceline, for,



even as she stood on the threshold drinking in the keen night air and refreshing her eyes in the starlit darkness, the floor seemed to heave under her aching feet, and her brain swam dizzily. As the carriage at last rolled away she leant out of the window, saw once more the proudly-cut features of her host standing out clear and pale against the rich carving of the massive door, and then sinking back with a sigh of exhaustion, was glad to rest her aching head on her father's comfortable shoulder.

"This evening is real enjoyment," said Berkeley enthusiastically, as they turned back into the ballroom. "I only wish it would never cease!"

His father turned suddenly, and saw the crimson glow on his son's fair cheek, and the glad sparkle in his eye. A shadow flitted across his face, but concealment of pain was with him second nature, and he answered with a composure which was almost merry: "Never cease! what, you would whirl round like a teetotum for ever and for ever? It is worse than the congregations' 'ne'er break up' idea of eternity!"

Berkeley laughed, and stole a curious glance at his father's face. All day long he had kept as much as possible out of his sight. Josceline's presence, during their short afternoon ride, had sufficed to prevent the broaching of obnoxious topics, and Berkeley had been able to detect nothing

unusual in Lord Rotherhame's manner but a slight veiled coldness, which no one but himself seemed to remark. He secretly hoped that by degrees Lord Rotherhame might be accustoming himself to the idea which yesterday had startled him, and that his firmness would ultimately win the day. But no such hopes could wholly free his heart from the oppression that weighed it down, and though in the excitement of the ball he had succeeded in forgetting his burden awhile, a secret throb would, even during those merry hours, return at intervals, to remind him disagreeably that a rough touch had struck the harmonious strings of the sweet home life, and set them all awry in jarring discord.

## CHAPTER XII.

O world, thy slippery turns ! Friends now fast sworn,  
Whose double bosoms seem to wear our heart,  
Whose house, whose meal, whose bed, whose exercise  
Are still together, who twin, as 'twere, in love  
Unseparable, shall within this hour  
On a dissension of a doit, break out  
To bitterest enmity.

SHAKESPEARE.

It was Christmas Eve—a cold frosty day with a threatening of snow, and within the Castle there was a bustle of preparation for the coming festival. Loads of holly and mistletoe lay heaped upon the floors. The cook, red-faced and cross, presided in the crypt-like stone kitchen over vast pies and ponderous joints, the larder was filled to overflowing with game, venison and turkeys, and, closely shut within the folding-doors of the Red Drawing room, Miss Oliver and her myrmidons were adorning a Christmas Tree. Ralph and Josceline sat side by side in the deep embrasure of one of the seven tall windows in the great hall. They had been discussing for the twentieth time the now all absorbing theme of the mysterious appearance in the Wardrobe Room. The more they talked, the more did Josceline's suspicions of Mrs. Weedon steal their poisonous way into Ralph's unwilling mind. They came to him when he went to her cottage with his sisters

and sat down to gossip over the fire; they troubled him when, from his windows in the Ruby Tower, he watched her toiling up the steep approach in her plaid shawl with her big basket on her arm; through the falling twilight they assailed him when, according to old custom, she came into his room at night to tuck him up, and kiss him with her rough old lips. A false tone began, to his fancy, to mingle with the guttural mirth of her laugh; her quotations from Scripture seemed to lose their former unction. Altogether—although reason could not sanction the preposterous notion that Granny Weedon could have any illicit dealings with her own son's murderer, although his ancient belief in her faithfulness and worth often asserted itself against the wild new doctrines which Josceline had impiously instilled—Ralph made up his mind that he could not altogether ignore his doubts, and that nothing but proof positive would avail to restore to him the comfortable security of his former relations with the old nurse. Burning curiosity and vague uneasiness alike urged him to attempt some solution of the baffling mystery of Peter Tibbetts's reappearance. Dead or living, there in the Wardrobe Room he had surely been, and it seemed to Ralph more conceivable that the unquiet spirit should be wandering restlessly about the scenes of its crime, than that Peter in the body should adventure himself in a place

where his every feature was known, and where detection meant inevitably a violent death upon the gallows. Again and again he cudgelled his brain for any possible motive for such a foolhardy defiance of danger, for any clue even as to the means by which the old man having appeared in the Wardrobe Room five minutes earlier, could have obliterated all signs of his recent presence, and here again he was utterly at fault.

Granny was up at the cottage, his father out of doors, and the valet away at dinner, and Ralph had stolen with Josceline to Little John's Tower, and examined all possible means of ingress and egress from the Wardrobe Room. At last between them a plan had been arranged, through which they faintly hoped some light might be thrown on their perplexity. It was Mrs. Weedon's custom to come up from time to time to the Wardrobe Room about twilight, kindle a fire, and sit alone awaiting his Lordship, who often joined her there for a chat before dinner. On such occasions—Ralph recalled now with a strange thrill of anticipative excitement—she always locked the door. What her occupation might be in those hours of secret solitude no one knew. They determined that between them they would inform themselves on this point. The Wardrobe Room abutted on the ruinous portion of the Castle, and on the twelve yards of wall between its casement and the great

arch of the dismantled hall the century-old ivy grew rank and strong. It was agreed that, fastening round his waist a rope attached to the central mullion, one of them should climb under cover of darkness, and by aid of the ivy towards the Wardrobe Room, and then, standing before the window, which was placed half way through a wall six feet deep, should closely watch the old woman's proceedings. They were in the act of deciding to which of them this adventurous post should be entrusted when a figure appeared in the doorway, and Ralph, with a disagreeable start, perceived his father.

"Ralph," he said, "I want you."

Ralph rose unwillingly. "If you are in no particular hurry, I had thought of going down to the Church with Murray-Carr, to see if we could be of any help in the decorations," he replied.

"I shan't keep you long. Come into the library."

Ralph followed with a look of discomfort, which was not much lightened by the significant grin of Josceline, who guessed for what purpose his friend was summoned from him. Into the library he went with lingering steps.

It was a cheerful-looking room on the ground floor, with a large bay window, through whose diamond panes was visible a long grassy sweep under an arching aisle of leafless branches, and beyond, framed in their deep setting, a distant vista of hoary Abbey

towers. The walls, wainscotted with fragrant cedar, were lined with bookshelves containing ponderous tomes—state-trials, parliamentary blue-books, county histories, and stiff works on law and agriculture. The chairs and sofas were of bright scarlet leather; over the fireplace hung the portrait of a tall slight stripling, with falling chestnut locks. An open embroidered collar displayed a finely-cut and slender throat, and the proud melancholy of the narrow oval face struck the beholder with an impression of foreboding sadness. It was the picture of Simon Harold, Lord Rotherhame's boy-uncle, whose bones had long since become playthings of the briny Atlantic waves.

"Close the door," said Lord Rotherhame, and Berkeley obeyed.

He felt nervous and embarrassed, but took comfort in the reflection that the duty of breaking the ice would this time devolve upon his father. He felt almost glad now that the discussion was to be resumed, anything seemed better than the tacit alienation of the past few days. He could brook his father's anger better than his coldness.

"I wished to say to you," began Lord Rotherhame at last, standing with his elbow on the chimney-board as he spoke, his graceful head resting on his hand, and his eyes fixed unconsciously upon the leaping flames, "that I have thought over what you told me the night of your return, and

have seen no reason to change the determination I then came to."

He paused, and Ralph said nervously, "Because, father, you know nothing but the bare outline of the story."

"Unfortunately, the little I do know is sufficient to prove that you do not deserve any indulgence from me in the question. I suppose you expect me to act towards you as to one who has come to years of discretion, and though I think, in the light of past events, there may be difference of opinion on that point, I will tell you the reasons, Berkeley, for my refusal to do so much as listen to the details of a story, whose outlines are repulsive and ludicrous. First then, I see plainly that you have been made a fool of by your tutor's family, and that Miss Bradshaw is in love, not with you, but with your position. Secondly, you are too young to know your own mind. Thirdly, Mr. Bradshaw is not a gentleman born, and your marriage into his family would be productive of all the misery that invariably results from an artificial union between persons sundered by descent, education, habits and manners. Fourthly, that your intercourse with this household has already dragged you into a selfish disregard of your own kindred, and a profound breach of trust towards your father, of which I should once have thought you incapable. Finally, that



she should have enticed you into such conduct is alone proof to me that this young lady—were she a duke's daughter—is no proper acquaintance for my son."

Berkeley's eyes sparkled, and he opened his lips for an eager defence of his lady-love. Suddenly he hesitated, stammered and looked down. He felt conscious that in truth the long concealment of his engagement was entirely due to the strenuous determination of the Bradshaw family. It was impossible to clear Caroline on this point, although to do so he would have been willing to have let his father believe that more blame rested with himself.

"Poor little Carry," he pleaded at last, "surely you wouldn't utterly condemn a young girl for one wrong or foolish action? Don't you admit that one may be hurried by sudden pressure into a single slip, and yet not be altogether bad? You were far away, and she and I both thought it would be a fatal thing to put our case to you in writing, that we could never make you understand it all except by word of mouth."

"I don't know what you mean by 'putting your case' to me. I understood you to say the other night that you had given Miss Bradshaw a promise of marriage altogether independent of my consent."

Ralph felt his father's eyes fixed on him, and knew that despite the studied calmness of his tone they were imperious. "Yes," he

answered in a low voice, "I know I ought not to have done that, but I didn't act altogether in cold blood, and my one absorbing wish all through was to get your sanction."

Lord Rotherhame's eye flashed like a hawk's. "Spare yourself the trouble of further excuses, Ralph. I don't quarrel with you for putting a new acquaintance before your father—your confidence and affection are your own to bestow or withhold, and I should be the last to sue for either. But that, at your time of life, you should absolutely ignore my authority, is a stretch beyond the reach of my toleration. Till you are of age I am responsible for you, and rebellion is therefore a domestic inconvenience to be promptly snuffed out. I have written to your tutor to say that I remove you from his charge, and from this moment forbid you all intercourse whatever with his family. On this sheet are the lines which state your personal submission to my decision, and which you must sign yourself, as I told you the other night."

Ralph interrupted eagerly. He had perfectly understood that to his father the real sting of his conduct was the personal slight given by his breach of confidence and implied preference of another. But he had not dared touch on so sore a point till Lord Rotherhame's own words afforded him a pretext. "Dearest father," he exclaimed, "I have given you no reason to say that my love to

you is altered. You *know* that I adore the ground you tread on."

"For pity's sake spare us the introduction of sentiment," interposed Lord Rotherhame, with a freezing smile. "Caressing words, Berkeley, have a fancy value, they are worth little unless they represent realities. I remember last time we were together this talk about 'adoration' seemed to me sincere and simple enough; since it has passed from hand to hand, and is bandied back to me from Miss Bradshaw, it has lost a little of its pretty pristine gloss."

Ralph flushed angrily, but made no answer.

"Now, will you favour me by reading these lines, and appending your signature?" continued Lord Rotherhame after a short pause, handing him a sheet of writing-paper.

Ralph cast his eye over them. They contained nothing more than a formal statement, briefly worded, of his acquiescence in his father's decision.

"You forget," he said quietly, "that in signing this I should be perjuring myself. It is not a week since I gave Miss Bradshaw my word of honour that I would never give her up."

"The more fool you, and she for believing you," returned his father with a contemptuous laugh. "Unfortunately it did not enter into your calculations that there was a third party in the case, without whose

concurrence your word of honour was valueless as a living man's testament."

There was a pause. Berkeley stood silently with his eyes upon the paper. Lord Rotherhame made an impatient gesture.

"You had better let your letter go without a postscript, father," Berkeley at last said, almost inaudibly, "it is impossible for me to have a hand in it."

"Do you mean to tell me," and there was a sound in his tone as of distant thunder, "that you refuse to obey my distinct command?"

"I mean that my promise binds me," answered Ralph, unable to master the trembling of his voice, "and that I could do nothing which would so much as imply that I was ignorant of its sacred obligation."

Another pause. Lord Rotherhame did not choose to speak till he had outward mastery over the passionate resentment that was boiling in his heart.

"Go then," he said at last, "you are under my most extreme displeasure! All but the most formal intercourse will cease between us till you have apologised and made me the submission I demand!"

Berkeley, pale and agitated, withdrew without a word, and the door closed between son and father.

## CHAPTER XIII.

I remember the time, for the roots of my hair were stirred  
By a shuffled step, by a dead weight trailed,  
By a whispered fright.

TENNISON.

IN the dull fall of the December day, Berkeley stood alone upon a tiny wooden bridge in the remotest depths of the garden which overlapped the hill on which his father's Castle stood. The bridge connected the "Robber's Walk"—a long grass avenue blackly overhung by solemn firs—with a flight of grey stone steps whose base was fretted by the perpetual play of eddying water. Weeds, green and dank, clung thickly about these steps, brambles and bushes, now white with frosty dew, elbowed them on either hand, and at their summit, on one side of the square parapet, was a neglected looking summer-house—a Corinthian temple, stained, moss grown, clogged with ivy, and looking as though its deity had abandoned it in disgust to the wayward desecration of wind and weather. The whole place seemed a prey to the spirits of gloom and disorder, whose moody unkempt forms hovered broodingly among dead leaves, rotting wood and ragged undergrowth.

Berkeley's attitude as he leant over the bridge was listless too, and there was a dejected abstraction in his dark eyes as he

gazed down into the gurgling waters. At intervals he threw in leaves and shreds of stick, whose hurried progress onward he watched with a kind of dreary interest—glad when some friendly shoal of stones proved a harbour of refuge, sympathetically grieving when a fresh eddy swept them out towards the shadowy Unknown. Types they seemed to him of hapless human souls, called perforce out of peaceful nothingness, launched upon the stream of being, tossed hither and thither by its winds and currents, and ever driven onward to the mysterious sea, which washes darkly the shores of this mortal life. His melancholy mood made him read sad parables in everything—in the kingfisher, whose blue lightning-flash, illuminating momentarily the gloomy water-way, revealed yet deeper depths of darkness beyond ; in the stream itself, the little stream which, unseen save by the hart's-tongue fern that kissed its face, came on its lonely way from the heart of the oak forest, and sang as it flowed towards the sea. The place of its secret birth what tongue could tell, what ear detect its last sigh as it gave up the ghost in the restless ocean bed? Like Melchisedec, without beginning and without ending—like man, shut in by mystery, knowing neither his starting place nor final goal.

Ralph's spirits were oppressed, not only by vague speculative misgivings, but by the perplexities of his immediate position. Look

on which side he would, he could discover no way out of his dilemma. He realised more definitely than he ever had before that his father's love for him was of an exacting nature, which could with difficulty tolerate a rival, and to which Caroline's claims could never fail to appear an impertinent usurpation. It would be no easy task to quiet his aroused jealousy, even could Ralph give the required submission and renounce the connection which was so displeasing to him. But that he might not do. He saw clearly now—ah! with what miserable clearness! that his love for Caroline was feeble and colourless beside his passion for his father—that there was a savour, a fascination, a fineness about Lord Rotherham's nature which hers lacked utterly. But for the rigid promise of fidelity he had given her, he would be free at this moment to obey his father—nay, to do so would be his bounden duty. Fatal promise! More fatal weakness which had led him to entangle himself in a course of conduct which ignored his filial duty! Yet even now might it not be that, at his age, his father's claim on his obedience should be reckoned prior to any other claim? But no! if he broke it, he could never in after life recall that scene in the Deerhurst garden, when his written vow called forth his little girl's grateful tears, without a consciousness of intolerable humiliation, which would make him feel unfit for the society of gentlemen. Would his father

draw back? communicate his own resolve to Mr. Bradshaw without insisting on making him a party to his action? Inconceivable! Would he ever pardon him if he persisted in disobedience? More inconceivable still!

Berkeley ascended the steps and leant with contracted brows over the low stone parapet by the temple.

"Oh, mother, mother!" he whispered, "if only you were by me now. Sweet mother in Heaven, think of me!" Heaven is a large place and very far away, but if Love be indeed the soul of this universe of ours, it may well be that the boy's yearning invocation reached the ears of his mother-saint.

A wild scene it was which stretched below Ralph's eyes, and over which the December light was waning—a bare brown world of withered heath—high hills shutting out the distant view, their foot hidden in gathering fog, their head in grey snow-clouds. The sunset pageant had faded; one lurid streak of red alone remained to mark the spot where Day had died. The mist rose fast to shroud its corpse in its white, cold, winding-sheet—it's soul, undying Light, had fled, to make glad other lands and other seas in the far mysterious West.

The evening deepened. Whispered rustlings increased in the surrounding branches, sounds arose like dropping stealthy footsteps, that strange kind of life began to stir which awakes in natural things when human



creatures go indoors and leave the world alone. Then Nature breaks her majestic silence and, revealing her great soul no more in types and figures merely, speaks by the grass, the leaves, and myriad insect voices, a language which the sky alone can understand. Mortals may well feel themselves intruders at such hours, and hence arise the superstitious fancies which beset the heart when night overtakes us in a solitary place. Ralph began to feel instinctive yearnings after fire-light and the society of his kind; to cast stealthy glances round as though apprehensive of finding the interstices of fir and laurel branches filled with eerie forms, and the brushwood below the parapet alive with goblin faces. He suddenly remembered that he stood on the threshold of a place which was regarded by the country people far and wide as unhallowed ground, that right beneath him lay the pathway leading from the Traveller's Rest to Culpepper's Bowl—a path which no belated rustic would choose to tread after dusk on this night of all nights in the year—a dark night in the Rotherhame annals, the anniversary of that fatal Christmas Eve, on which the ill-starred stranger had passed along it to his doom. Did he not seem to see him now—the tall, red-bearded man—hurrying onward through the falling rain, eager with hopes never to be realised, straining through darkness eyes soon to be for ever closed. How he must have talked

with his child, chatting with her of their coming journey and of the new life in London to which he was taking her, and—all the while—as they spoke cheerfully of the future that would never be, Death dogged their footsteps—Death, that grim wanderer of this fallen world—in the guise of a man bent and hoary, yet none the less capable of hurling the irrevocable dart. Five years to-night since the festival of heavenly love had been defiled by that deed of blood and violence! Berkeley determined he would go. He was flinging himself off the parapet, fearful and yet half contemptuous of his irrational panic, when a low, sobbing sigh fell distinctly on his ear—a sigh which, strange to say, appeared to come from above his head.

He started and strained his eyes into the darkness, a shivering dread seizing him that he was about again to see the murderer's old and evil face. Oppressed by that weird instinct which warns us in lonely places that we are not alone, he kept his gaze upon the shadowy bushes, until through the gathering gloom he could discern a few feet above him a pair of large, round eyes. Was it an owl roosting in the boughs? He plunged in his arm. But no night-bird rushed forth hooting, his fingers gripped a fragment of stuff which met his tug with a passive but steady resistance, and the next moment the owner of the eyes was discovered to him—a little girl with cottage

bonnet thrown back on her head, and a tangled mass of long, fair hair, which gleamed whitely in the twilight. Her face, he could see, was stiff with fear, and with the fury of a terrified kitten she fastened her nails in his cheek, and seizing his hair twisted it till it was almost dragged out by the roots.

"I say, have a little mercy!" he exclaimed, loosening his hold of her, baffled for the moment by the violence of her onslaught. "Are you foul-fiend, or garotter? somebody very bad indeed I should conjecture by your treatment of a poor fellow-Christian who meant you no harm."

"It is Lord Berkeley!" cried his small assailant, her voice trembling with passionate supplication. "Don't kill me, please, Lord Berkeley. I'm not a wicked robber, I am Dolly Weedon, and I didn't know you, or I wouldn't have been so cruel."

"My little Dolly!" he exclaimed in blank amazement, and then added smiling, "I don't know what you deserve, you hussy! You have almost scalped me, and my nose, I verily believe, you have up with you somewhere in your nest. How on earth did you manage to get up into that tree? I must say your climbing does credit to my instructions."

"Lift me down!" she cried, leaning towards him and clinging tightly round his neck, and Berkeley heard her heart thump against his side as he bore her from her lofty

perch and set her gently on the parapet. "You sweet boy to come and save me," she continued, in a pathetic access of gratitude. "I came here all alone to play, and climbed up into the ivy bush, and when I had got up I *could not* get down again. My head turned round and round and everything I looked at, and the ground would jump up and hit me."

"You were giddy, Scrap, and it was a mercy you didn't fall and break your neck."

"It was so 'gusting having to stop there," resumed Dolly, plaintively, "it got dark, and I knew they would say I was naughty for staying out so late, and I thought I should have to be there by myself all night. I tried and tried to think of the white angels, but I couldn't help being frightened of them somehow. They can't talk, can they? and they are all made of air."

"I never saw one, but I am quite sure they are kind and beautiful, Dolly," he added with some hesitation. After a moment's thought, "Can you remember ever in your life having seen this heath before?"

Dolly drove her head violently into his shoulder, and began to pinch his arm with cold, frightened fingers. He understood the mute reply. Although the child was never heard to speak of the tragedy which had closed her father's life on earth, it was impossible that her memory should have lost its frightful impression, and the fatal heath, seen once more under its old aspect of fog and

darkness, might well bring back in freshness that long past hour of agony. He kissed and soothed her, but she broke out suddenly into a peculiar sharp cry—

“Oh! father! father! father! why did you die? I want you so—nobody likes to have me, and I’m all alone!”

“Pretty, dearest little girl,” said Ralph, hastily pulling out his pocket-handkerchief, and cramming it into her tear-drowned eyes, “don’t say that nobody loves you. I love you—I will always be your friend, and will never see you wronged or put upon—you may trust me for that, Dolly, indeed you may!”

Ralph spoke vehemently, as the impulse of the moment prompted him, Mrs. Bradshaw and her vulgar contempt for her lowborn niece being in his thoughts. He little knew to what he pledged himself.

“But you can’t be near at nights, when I wake up in the dark, and fancy I see that dreadful *face*,” replied Dolly, her chest yet heaving with the tumult of her feelings. “Do you know what I mean? not father’s, but that one which came up behind, and made him scream. I think most likely it was Satan. Just now when I was sitting up in the tree,” she added pointing upwards, “I thought perhaps he would know I was alone in the dark, and would come and make me bleed too, and carry me off, p’raps, to live with him in the red-hot oven.”

"Satan can't do that," said Ralph, with an air of knowledge which to Dolly was deliciously reassuring. "He used to come on earth as a dragon, and fight with the saints in his scaly armour, but now-a-days he is not allowed to show himself, and has no power to hurt us except by putting bad thoughts into our minds."

"Oh! I don't mind *that!*" answered Dolly with renewed cheerfulness.

"And now it's getting very cold," said Ralph rising, "and I think I had better take you home. Come along; you can talk about it all as we go back, you know."

Little Dolly took his hand and trotted submissively by his side along the Robber's Walk, prattling as she went an eager, hurried recital of the impressions made upon her by her recent descent into cottage life.

"Now I'm not a lady any more, but a poor person," she ended indignantly, "no one calls me Miss Dolly, and I have to eat with steel forks and put a knife in my mouth and curtsy to the Miss Bogles. And when the footmen from the Castle come into our kitchen, they call me their little sweetheart, and give me such loud kisses. My Granny lives in the lane you know, and she used to be nurse to that lord up at the Castle."

"That is my father, Dolly, and he is very fond of your grandmother. I call her Granny too, so you see that makes you in a sort of way my little cousin. She is so jolly

and good-natured; don't you like her much better than your Aunt Bradshaw?"

"Like Granny? Oh no! She makes my head so sore with her knocks. I don't think she loves me at all. She says I'm spoilt and stuck up, that she will teach me my place and make me a servant one day. She's not good a bit, Lord Berkeley."

This was said in a tone of such profound conviction, that coming on the suspicions implanted by Josceline, it made an uncomfortable impression on Ralph—so uncomfortable indeed, that he failed to pursue the subject, and contenting himself with general promises to espouse her cause, hurried her homewards through the forest. A word from the "young lord" turned the child's wrathful reception into a kindly one, and he did not leave her till he had seen her cosily ensconced in the chimney corner, her feet toasting in the blaze of the wood fire, and a bowl of smoking potatoes in her hands. Stooping down, he himself pulled off her soaked boots—an act of condescension for which Dolly was commanded to be humbly thankful, and quitted her with a long, lingering hug, and a strict injunction to Granny to be "most awfully kind, and give her everything she wanted."

The mud in the lane was freezing hard as Ralph retraced his steps, and the rain puddles of yesterday were congealed to thick ice, over which he slipped as he picked his way in the darkness. A few flakes of snow began to

fall invisibly through the night air, and it would have been difficult to keep in the right direction, but for the black length of the Barbican, which overhung by creeping plants, and broken at intervals by low, round towers, stood out darkly against the less profound gloom of night. An overpowering repugnance seized him to the idea of going within doors, and putting on a hollow pretence of sharing in the general hilarity of the bonny Yule-tide. Like a prisoner on the rack, the rival duties of fealty to his betrothed and obedience to his father tore him violently in opposite directions, and unable to satisfy their conflicting claims, that sickness of life and effort crept over him, which besets all the children of the Happy One when the iron is eating deeply into the fibres of their being.

"Birthdays ought not to be kept with rejoicings," he thought, as he mounted the steep zigzag to the Castle. "Why should we be glad to have come into a world full of perplexity and pain? If one could only foretell the day of one's death, that would be the day to make merry on."



## CHAPTER XIV.

Night is now with hymn or carol blest.

SHAKESPEARE.

And shapeless sights came wandering by,  
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,  
Mocking me :

SHELLEY.

It was an almost impossible thing to give a generally festive air to the Castle of Rother-hame. Although cart-loads of holly had been brought in and dispersed broad-cast, and every servant in the house had lent a hand during the brief hours of the wintry afternoon to aid in its adornment, there yet remained galleries, rooms, whole towers in the more unfrequented portions of the building whose rugged and sorrowful aspect was unsoftened by any sign of participation in the joy of the Yule-tide.

Even on the brightest day in June the Castle looked like a shadow on the smiling summer prospect, or rather a haunt of shadows gathered by the ages, which no modern sunlight had power to disperse. But now in the dead of winter, when the snow was falling in the outer darkness, and the presence of human life was confined to the favoured chambers where fires burned cheerily, the habitual gloom of the place seemed to take to itself body and substance, and to

stalk hither and thither, up the long galleries and uninhabited suites of rooms, with giant outline and forbidding mien. Has not every building a spirit of its own? like our own souls, invisible, yet seeming at times to look out through the prison bars of the body till its shape becomes, as it were, tangible to sight—the spirit which its architect infused into the lifeless material, when welding stone, and wood and mortar into one, he breathed into them the breath of his own life and thought, virtue going out from him which thenceforth belonged no more to himself, but to the work he had created. The buildings of the Past speak to us with a voice of human speech. But the erections of the Present are made to order, on one cut and dried plan, a dozen at a time, or basely mimic those mighty predecessors of whom the world once travailed in birth. And hence they utter no intelligible language, but rather the imitative and mindless babble of the parrot or the ape. There were giants in the earth in the old days, giants that lived strong and simple lives on herbs and water, and sowed the crop of knowledge whose harvest we now reap. And we, entering into the fruit of their labours, and glutted with an intellectual plenty which we are unable to digest, look back with inflated superiority on our forefathers' rude poverty, unconscious that our own surfeit only swells our bulk, and cannot help our growth towards the skies.

When Ralph came indoors he found that the hall had been prepared for the grand event of the morrow—a dinner of turkeys, venison, snapdragon, mince pies and punch, to which, in compliance with immemorial custom, the whole household was to sit down in common. Long tables were laid down the centre, covered with white damask on which the warm fire glow fell cheerily. The side-board on the dais, where the family dined, was laden with golden salvers and goblets, all the choicest plate and wines being brought forth in honour of the season, and a vast mistletoe hung over the space that had been cleared for mummers and village fiddlers. Family portraits looked out beneath canopies of yew, laurel and blood-red holly, and even the empty casques and hard skulls of stags and foxes seemed to have budded into vegetable life. A peep into the great vaulted kitchen, where a fire sufficient to roast an ox was roaring up the chimney, and a surreptitious visit to the servants' hall, where his father and sisters were giving away benefactions of beef and pudding to the poor on the estate, had but the effect of deepening the gloom of his mood. He watched the beaming countenances of the village matrons as they wrapped up their joints in newspapers and bore them off triumphantly beneath their shawls, and bitterly wished himself one of that fortunate number, whose souls could be raised to bliss by a lump of meat. He thought

of all his past Christmasses; of the varied delights of each succeeding period, of the games and theatrical performances, whose inspiring genius he had been; of his mother, serene and fair, moving about among her children, and of her voice whose tones, echoing back from the grave, sent him even now almost wild with hopeless longing. As he thus stood musing, his father came suddenly through the door. He looked up smiling as he saw the boyish figure, but instantly recognising Ralph, a cold shade passed over his face, and bestowing on him an icy glance he passed on in silence. Ralph felt a shrinking horror of receiving such a look from his father's eye, but he tried to drive away the pain of it by stirring himself up to inward defiance of its injustice, and went up to his room to fortify his constancy by a prolonged study of Caroline Bradshaw's photograph.

The elders of the family assembled at eight o'clock in the Cedar Drawing Room. Lord Rotherhame came across to Berkeley with an indifferent smile as they were about to go into the Dining Room, and said in his ear: "As I don't wish to make your conduct the gossip of the pantry, you will understand that if I occasionally speak to you at dinner, I do it in order to avoid remark."

"Very well," returned Berkeley, coldly. He had been working himself up to a high pitch of virtuous indignation at Caroline's wrongs, and his manner was in consequence

unusually disrespectful in its cool self-possession. It cost him another evil glance from his father—a glance too malignant for ordinary paternal displeasure.

“What a clever fellow your parson seems to be, my Lord,” remarked Mr. Murray-Carr in the course of the repast. “I have been spending my afternoon at the Rectory, you know. They asked me to stay on to luncheon and help the young ladies decorate the church, to which, though somewhat contrary to my principles, I consented, because I thought it would give me the opportunity of continuing a controversy I had begun with Doctors Bogle and Egerton upon the ‘Origin of matter.’ The clergy would be a great deal more enlightened than they are if they would seek occasions of intercourse with the laity, and hear the discoveries of the scientific world freely discussed by unprejudiced persons.”

“I hope, Murray-Carr, that you don’t consider me too hopelessly blind to be beyond the reach of your benevolent exertions?” said Mr. Daubeney, who, though sometimes slightly scandalised by the avalanche of nonsense that poured from the young gentleman’s lips, judged it wiser to laugh than to do him the compliment of appearing shocked. “I should be very glad if, when you have nothing better to do, you would occasionally enliven my solitary study.”

“With all the pleasure in life, Mr.

Daubeny, provided you let me know when my society begins to pall on you. Still, I confess, I don't see that much good would come out of an argument between us two, for the simple reason that it would be no argument at all, but a mere laying down of the law on either side."

"That is an admission which puts yourself beyond the pale of argument. It is one more frank than prudent, Josce."

"Well, I have no objection to admitting that I *do* lay down the law, because the laws of science, unlike the ecclesiastical dogmas to which *you* would refer, can be absolutely demonstrated, and I may consequently appeal to them with unquestioning confidence. Now, in our controversy of to-day, Archdeacon Egerton attacking me only with such-like weapons as Ecumenical Councils, Catholic consent, etc., etc., got floored at once, while Dr. Bogle's battle—meeting me as he did on my own ground—was harder fought, and his final overthrow, if more crushing, less ignominious. But I have not yet got to the end of my adventures. What think you befell me on my road to the Rectory?"

"I really cannot say," said Lord Rotherham languidly. "Did you discover a desert island, or were you attacked by a turkey?"

"Make a better guess!"

"O, pray have mercy, and don't inflict any guessing upon me! It is as bad as being asked riddles. If there is a thing I detest it

is the habit some people take up of making their fellow creatures wear out their brains over objectless conundrums. A flow of anecdote is equally objectionable. It engenders hypocrisy by forcing one to feign an interest one cannot feel, and encourages vanity by impressing one with the superiority of one's own reflections. I commission you to poison me at once when you catch me falling into the stage of superannuation which produces such weeds of social intercourse."

"No one enjoys doing a thing he can't do well," replied Josceline impudently. "Perhaps though, you feel with me that as life goes on, all pleasures pall, except the gastronomics. Well, I encountered this morning at the tuck-shop a young lady who boasts the double distinction of having been our fellow-disciple beneath the learned roof of Deerhurst Rectory, and an historic character in the annals of this village. How much will you pay me, Lettice, to get you a squint at the heroine of the tragedy of Culpepper's Bowl?"

"Nothing at all, thank you, Josce, for I have just enjoyed the exhibition gratis. Granny told me she was coming, so I went down this morning on purpose to see her and take her a doll."

"What do you mean, Murray-Carr?" interrupted Lord Rotherhame, tapping his knuckles impatiently upon the table, "by

saying that little Weedon has been with you at Mr. Bradshaw's?"

"Why that she has; she was there at least half last term. Mrs. Bradshaw never let out who she was till the last day, when she let Berkeley into the secret. I suppose she thought the connection was not aristocratic enough. Miss Weedon is her own sister's child, so our Madame la Duchesse, as we always call her, is sister-in-law to your former groom."

"It was simply a *mésalliance*, such as might have occurred in any family," burst in Ralph, startled out of his grave silence by Josceline's unkind candour.

"This interesting fact has been kept from me," said Lord Rotherhame sarcastically. "I wonder that Berkeley did not find a corner for it in one of his voluminous epistles. I don't know though, after all, that it is such a great come down for mongrel gentility to ally itself with a pure old peasant stock."

Josceline was a little sorry he had said what he had when he saw Lord Rotherhame's evident ill-temper, but he had long hated Mrs. Bradshaw for the manoeuvres by which she had entrapped his friend, and had made up his mind that Caroline was not likely to turn out a good or loving wife. Ralph relapsed into dead silence, and for the remainder of the meal sat with glowering eyes fixed immovably



upon his plate. "I shall not come down into the hall if you are there," said Lord Rotherham in a low fierce voice, as the party was following Lettice to see the mummers and the Christmas tree, for which exhibition the whole household had assembled, "so devise some excuse, and absent yourself."

Ralph made no answer, but he drew back and grew a little pale. He waited till his father was out of sight, and then asking the footman to let his sister know that he had a headache and was going to bed, lighted his candle and slowly ascended the stairs.

To go apart from his family while the time-honoured customs of the festival were celebrating, and all below stairs was bustle and excitement, oppressed Ralph with an overpowering sense of isolation. The distant sounds of merrymaking, music and laughter, grew fainter beneath the groined roof as he mounted higher, and when he turned aside down the long passage that connected the Keep with the Ruby Tower he thought involuntarily of his drowned Uncle Simon, whose room he occupied, and of the night, when driven forth by his father's inexorable resentment, he had escaped from his home, and gone away to bury his wrongs fifty fathoms deep under the briny Atlantic's surge.

His room, as he closed the door, seemed impregnated with an atmosphere of solitude. There was forgetfulness on the hearth, where the fire, neglected by the pre-occupied house-

maid, had given up the ghost and left behind it only dull grey ashes; banishment stared at him through the open window by which the night air entered keenly; oppression lurked in the voiceless quiet, whose loneliness the echoes of festivity below deepened and made more lonely still; repellant unwelcome frowned from the bed, whose sheets were white and cold as layers of ice. His heart swelled as though it would have fain have overflowed in tears, but forbidden the effeminate relief by his manly will it subsided again and slowly sank within him. He did not know himself under these novel conditions of trouble and alienation, felt constrained and shy when abandoned to the sole society of this new sad self, and hastened to fling off his clothes and spring into bed that he might find escape in sleep and darkness. In the waking interval pictures annoyed his mental eye of the holly-decked hall, with the blazing Christmas tree, in the deep shelter of whose bristling branches were hidden the presents he had bought at Deerhurst for his sisters and favourite servants; of the eager group that surrounded it—the children in white frocks, the trim maids and condescending footmen, the bloodhounds gravely sharing with kind sympathy in the general pleasure, the army of cats and dolls that Edward and Cicely, in their dread of seeming exclusive, would have ranged upon the sofas to see the sight. Night and Winter,

there gaily transformed and no more to be recognised, enveloped him here repulsively, and he turned with pain from those tantalising images, and burying his head beneath the bed-clothes tried to shut out the noise of the wind that blustered round the walls. How harsh it sounded! like the voice of some traveller, whom wanderings over steppes of Siberian snow have made hungry and fierce. How it would scream over the mound beneath which his mother rested! Would its rude breath reach her where, six feet deep, she lay wrapped in her linen cerement? Would it disturb her and make her shiver in her sleep? Would dim wonderings perplex her benumbed brain that they who loved her should slumber warm in the comfortable house and leave her to wear the long death-night away alone? A kind of pride seized him that of all her kindred he in circumstances approached to her most nearly. He too was cold—he forgotten—he also was alone.

Then he tried to lift his thoughts above material ruin and the deep dull grave, to picture the spirit-life of Paradise. What might it be now, the soul that had gone forth beyond all limitations of time and sense that could shape his human thought of it? Would he recognise his mother, were he at this moment across some crystal gulf of infinite distance permitted to behold her? Would she not be to him a holy essence, a glorified

abstraction, that would elude the touch of his passionate mortality? Not thus did he want her, no white-robed saint singing eternal alleluias would satisfy the craving of sonhood for maternal caress and kisses. He wanted to touch, to talk, to eat with her, to rest his head upon her breast. Will not such natural longings, forbidden by the false refinement of a quasi-spirituality, find satisfaction at last in our Father's mansions? Does not the remembrance of the Christ in Mary's arms teach us that they are no accidental infirmities of our mortal state, but divinely implanted seeds of rapture and intense emotion, whose full harvest we shall reap at last in the Land of Love? There, slowly unfolding its lovely leaves, human nature shall gradually ripen to its perfection, beneath the sunning smile of its Creator-Father. There, cheated by no mocking metamorphosis, we again shall possess each other, soul and body—self merging into self, yet each entire. Does not the Incarnation of the Godhead deepen in us the lesson taught by nature, that God has consecrated the union of matter and spirit in a marriage so close—ineffable—that separated, neither can attain to their perfection, and that what He has thus joined together may not for ever be put asunder.

Imperceptibly Ralph's sorrowful musings faded into unconsciousness. He slept heavily, and did not hear the cessation of the music

to which his sisters had been dancing, nor the noisy steps with which Josceline, after looking in to see if he was awake, retreated from his door.

The night wore on. He might have remained peacefully unconscious till the arrival of Parsons with hot water in the morning, had he not been disturbed at the turn of the night by a strange confused noise at his casement. He was sleeping so deeply that the sound mingled with his dreams, and he found it hard to disentangle the two from one another. Confused, and with a brain obscured by drowsy mists, he struggled up and listened.

The pallid glimmer of wintry dawn was turning the blackness of his room into a ghostly grey, and the peculiar chill that marks the hour when our forces are at their lowest ebb, when the traveller turns faint and the dying die, made the air cold as the atmosphere of an ice-house. The strange noise at the window continued, a hubbub of cries and beating on the panes. Not yet master of his senses, Ralph stumbled out of bed and crossed the room towards the window. Outside, in the fast discolouring gloom, he saw the snowflakes whirling in mazy dance, and, with his face against the panes, the dark figure of *a man*. Too bewildered to reason, and only vaguely surmising that he must have climbed up by the ladder which the day before had been used by the village mason, Ralph hastily

unfastened the casement. The sound of cries ceased immediately, giving place to the yell of the wind, and *the man came in*. He wore an ordinary rough walking-dress—at the moment it did not strike Ralph as strange that the darkness had not prevented his seeing this—by the unobservant blank of his eyes he appeared to be blind, and his beard and clothes were dripping wet. He crossed the room hurriedly, leaving a track of drops in his wake, and passed out through the door. Ralph felt impelled to follow him. He did not reason with himself, or decide that it would be expedient to look into the mystery, but was forced onward by some mesmeric influence which it was impossible to resist. Never before had the well-known stairs and passages appeared to him eerie and unfamiliar as at this moment. The dripping stranger seemed to fill them as he went with a phantasmagoria of weird impressions, to impregnate them with a damp miasma. In Ralph's brain, distorted further by sleep and amazement, the sense of proportion seemed strangely to have miscarried, and the way and the time of his progress were unnaturally prolonged. A nameless horror took possession of him—an inexpressible panic that he was being lured into some snare, overpowered into captivity by a will stronger than his own. He began mentally to resist and to move more slowly. This gave him time to see that he was at the foot of the stairs lead-

ing to the Wardrobe Room. He paused. The wet stranger, without turning round, paused likewise, and the water running from his hair and clothes made a pool upon the step—a pool in which mingled a horrible taint of red. Again, as though under compulsion, Ralph moved forward. His guide did likewise, and the two ascended silently. The door of the Wardrobe Room opened, and the man passed in. Seizing the moment when he was out of sight, Ralph turned and fled. His knees knocked together, and his benumbed feet scarcely felt the stones they touched, but with the speed of movement the action of his heart, that had grown weak and laboured, revived, and his strength increased. There was a light in one bedroom of the Ruby Tower as he dashed up its steps. The door was partly open and he turned in eagerly. Two tall candles burned high at the head of the white bed, and, except for the human shape that rested on it, the room was empty. Again the boy's heart flagged with the old oppressive faintness, but urged by irresistible curiosity he drew near. The face was covered, but the bare mattress, the sharp, thin outline beneath the sheet, the deathly scent of the air, all told him that he was in the presence of a corpse. A lock of hair—hair like his own, curling and of dark auburn—rested on a small pillow above the sheet, and the sight sent a strange thrill through his veins. He stretched out his hand and lifted

one corner of the covering, then uttered a cry, and fell fainting on the floor. What face he had seen, he never told.

When consciousness returned, Ralph found himself lying warmly in his own bed. The memory of the fearful episode of the night flashed back in a moment on his brain and turned him sick and shivering. He started up, saw that the dawn was advancing, and one single beam of crimson slanting on the wall gave him a thrill of courage. He grasped the matchbox by his side and struck a light.

Slowly the feeble ray struggled into being, and at last burned out bright and cheery. He wrapped himself up, and taking his candle determined to retrace his steps and search for traces of his nocturnal visitor. Fear made him shrink from this course, but a sense of its necessity gave him resolution. It startled him to find that the door was locked as he had left it the previous evening, and that there was no sign of wet upon the floor. But to conclude that he had been merely dreaming was a ludicrous impossibility. He unlocked the door and carefully went over every step of the way that he had trodden to the Wardrobe Room, not forgetting in particular to examine the step where the stranger had paused. It was dry, and bore no trace or stain. Strange! Could he have been dreaming? Could that visitant of the night, of whose presence sight and



hearing had borne witness, have been but the offspring of an over-wrought, half-torpid brain? The stranger had been blind and wet—had the double event of the past week, the inexplicable appearance of the murderer of Culpepper Heath, and the sight of his victim's daughter shuddering by the border of the fatal moor, combined to paint upon his mind an image of her ill-fated father? But no—this episode had seemed too exact, too circumstantial, too distinct, too unlike all past experiences of dreamland, to admit of such an explanation. Staggered, but still unsatisfied, he ascended the stairs, and looked into the Wardrobe Room. It was empty, except for Oscar, who sleeping on the rug would inevitably have left a red mark on any night intruder that should rashly venture near his lair. The dog stood up as Ralph entered, and approached to invite a caress. He would willingly have followed him when he turned away, but the faithful hound could not quit the place of which his master had left him in charge, and crouching patiently again he pursued Ralph's retreating figure with eyes of wistful longing. Ralph felt relieved, and though still strongly impressed with the reality of his adventure, incredulity was growing fast; yet not so fast as to quell the shudder with which he turned the handle of the Blue Room door, the room whose awful secret had robbed him of consciousness. Willingly would he have

avoided the ordeal, and chosen some other way of returning to his bed-room, but till he had faced it he could feel no solid satisfaction, no security that the experience which had seemed so real was after all but the illusion of a fevered dream. Involuntarily he caught his breath as he put his hand through the aperture.

A sound—the very mundane sound of a snore—reached his ear, and with a glad leap of the heart he perceived the well-known face of the head housemaid reposing cheerful and rosy on the summit of a mass of feather beds. He flew back to his room mystified, but strangely reassured.

Memories and associations of the night well nigh stifled him when he had once more closed his door, and returned to inaction. He went to the window, able now to face the repetition of that action, and looked out. All around him lay outstretched ; the wide, white earth and the boundless sky. He drank in the keen air, and in the act his brain seemed to clear itself from brooding spectres. The stars were gladly dying in the unfathomed heights above, and on the vast verge of the silent west light fading softly into light. On the eastern horizon the glow was reddening, and the Sun was coming up—beautiful, generous, life-giving !

Night flies away before the sun,  
And fear doth into transport run,  
And grim death into life.

Slumbering comfortably in curtained beds, how few of us have welcomed in the dawn of the Birthday of our Lord. It is a mystery—like the rose's primal blush, like the dew-drop's creation, like the first thrill of love, like the birth of a human soul.

Faith and cheerfulness returned to Ralph's spirits with the coming of the sun. Like an inspiration the thought came to him of the last day of his life on earth; of the sun that would rise upon the dying in the morning and which never more would set, but like the morning star fade into the perfect day; of the human life that would die into life; of the new strength that would come with the rising of Heaven's cheerful, splendid morning.

Solemnly his eye lingered on the silent earth—church, wood, hills and village, all clad in robes of virgin whiteness, meet for her to wear who was now to celebrate the coming of the spotless Virgin-Son. No longer did the snow drifts enfold her like a shroud. Rather they seemed the swathing-bands of Christ's Incarnation, the fair and dazzling vesture of her espousals with Heaven's high King.

He was about to close the window and return to bed when a burst of music made him pause, and a number of cracked voices proceeding from fiddles, bass viols, and hoarse human throats, broke out into a droning carol. It was the yearly serenade with which the inhabitants of Rotherhame were greeted

on Christmas morning, and Ralph, who as a child had always believed it to come from the selfsame choir of angels that had sung above the Manger, now thought the rasping twiddles of the well-known hymn sweeter than any celestial psalm—

God bless you, merry gentlemen,  
May nothing you dismay,  
Remember Christ our Saviour  
Was born on Christmas Day.

Nothing could have happened more opportunely to complete his deliverance from morbid imaginings than this wholesome, in-harmonious strain of Christmas greeting. Hymn after hymn and carol after carol succeeded, broken at intervals by muttered colloquies. He could discern the figures of the musicians standing out darkly on the snow, forty feet beneath—a company of men and boys, half smothered in woollen comforters, who, whenever their duties permitted, relieved themselves by stamping their feet and beating their hands together. A few heads were to be seen projecting from other windows of the Castle, and in answer to the “Merry Christmas to you all,” which proceeded from that quarter, the leader of the waits finally stepped forth, and with a voice thin from exercise quavered out the time-honoured formula: “The same to you and many on ’em.”

To linger after the performance of this ceremony would have shown little more notion of propriety than to recover after receiving

extreme unction. The retreat was sounded, and Ralph beheld the quaint procession wending its way downward to the moat; young, sturdy lads, who were being brought up in their forbears' traditions, slackening their pace lest their old, bent fathers and grandfathers should be left behind. The snow deadened the sound of their footsteps and their voices soon died upon the distance. Ralph closed the window and went to his bed, drew the clothes up high to shut out the increasing light, and as returning warmth began to steal kindly over his chilled limbs, sank gradually into a sleep as soft and pleasant as any that he had slept in his mother's arms. And so this Christmas morning rose on fast-closed eyelids—eyelids which another return of the joyous season would find sealed to a longer and a deeper slumber yet.

The Great Universal Father Who made all mankind—with its endless variety of nature and disposition, unlikeness within similarity, difference within difference—has an education of perfect comprehension for each single individual. To each nature, to each soul, He gives the knowledge that each can bear; at times winking at ignorance rather than suffer His people to be blinded with excess of light; keeping them in the twilight, lest with bewildered eyes, they should seem to see "men like trees walking." Is the mother's care for her little, unrecognising, senseless babe, less tender, less complete, than for the child who

can walk and speak? Is God less with His heathen people, because they do not know Him, because they do not consciously realise the All-holy Presence in which they live and move and have their being, any more than they understand the law of the universe of which they are a part? Are we to read a fanciful partiality in the apparent inequality of the disposition of joy and sorrow in this world? or are we rather to adore in it a discriminating Wisdom which grants to each, love and joy, tears and loneliness, in exact proportion as they are required to develop each separate personality for a future of exquisite and intensified life?

The vision that had come to Ralph's sleeping brain during the night of Christmas Eve, however purely natural its causes might be, had its spiritual significance for him, its own peculiar place in the preparatory noviciate of his earthly life. Hitherto, although death had often fascinated him to eager speculation by its weird and universal mystery, he had looked on it as something apart from himself, out of the region of his practical experience. Is it possible when the young blood flows hotly through the veins, and every pulse beats high with vigorous life, to wear in thought the winding-sheet, to anticipate the cold inroads of corruption? As little possible as on a glorious summer day, when the earth wears her dress of leaves, and the sky its jewels of blue and gold, to realise the

silent snows of death-like winter. But for some such dream as he had had this night, Ralph might have been hurried on to the verge of the mysterious spirit-world without thought. The idea of dying might have come upon him with the suddenness of a nervous shock. As it was, a strange new influence seemed from this time to pass imperceptibly into his life—an influence of awe rather than alarm. He knew that visions as literal and as prophetic as his had often gone unfulfilled, and he had no sure expectation that his dream would come true? But life became endeared to him with a significance it had not worn before—the solemn significance that belongs to a possession which we know is slipping from our grasp.

## CHAPTER XV.

Dark and dull night flee hence, away,  
And give the honour to this day  
That sees December turned to May.

HERRICK.

THE sun shone gloriously on the morning of Christmas Day, and the robins sat twittering among leafless branches be-jewelled with hoar-frost and icicles. The snow was swept back along the frequented pathways by which the church-goers were to pass, but lay in deep drifts in ditches and hollows, or piled softly over prickly holly leaves and among the thin needles of Scotch firs. Cottage children gazed wonderingly at the pictures the frost had drawn upon their window-panes, and little boys, breathing hard enough to melt a glacier, slid one after another down the ruts along the road. The church bells rang merrily in the sharp air, and the smoke curled in thick wreaths above the moss-grown cottage roofs. Cheered by the encouraging prospect of roast beef and smoking puddings awaiting their return home, large families came flocking towards the church with beaming faces, and, making their way along a track between the tall bare beeches of the forest, the Rectory procession filed onwards in twos and threes. Geraldine brought up the rear,



honoured as usual by the escort of Robert, who gallantly carried her prayer and hymn-books, having previously made arrangement for the conveyance of his own by his sisters. She had long wearied of his unfailing companionship and increasing attentions, but not even these drawbacks could keep her from feeling glad at heart this festive morning.

"There you are, slipping again, Miss Egerton!" he exclaimed, as they crossed a plank over a frozen pond, "why won't you take my arm?"

"Because I'm afraid your parishioners would think we were 'keeping company,'" she answered laughing, and skilfully avoiding his out-thrust elbow.

"Keeping company? Oho, Miss Egerton! So that's the sort of thing your head's running on. By the way, it's such a joke! The governor saw us two pairing off to the stables this morning, and Ellen tells me he nudged your ma, and said, 'There go the two inseparables!'"

"But I don't approve of having such things said about me," said Geraldine, averting her head to hide the irrepressible dimpling of her lips, "and so I think we had a great deal better hurry on and catch up your sisters. Miss Barnes is walking alone, and I have hardly spoken to her yet this morning."

"No, no, don't now! You know one can't possibly talk before the girls, and as for Aunt Alice, she is old enough and ugly enough to

take care of herself. She was always wanting me to arm her up and down the Pier at Ryde last summer, but I can't say I quite fancied the idea of being looked on all over the place as an old maid's darling. Besides her face gets one mass of freckles in the summer. Don't you hate a woman with freckles?"

"I hate to hear young men make personal remarks about ladies, especially when they are uncomplimentary," returned Geraldine severely.

"Do you really though? Why, I always thought there was nothing one girl liked so well as to hear other girls abused, and that one couldn't rile one sweet creature more than by praising up another."

"If you act upon that theory, Mr. Bogle, I fear you will disgust more young ladies than you please. In particular, your sense of chivalry should keep you from criticising your own relations to an outsider."

"Well then, I'll set to and praise 'em all round; swear that my sisters are a pair of fascinating little coquettes, and that Miss Bartholomew's skin was highly embellished by the small-pox. Will that satisfy you, Geraldine? You'll excuse my dropping the 'Miss,' won't you? We're old acquaintances, you know, or if you think it makes it more proper, we'll dub ourselves cousins, eh?"

"Like cooks, when policemen court them through the area railings. Both epithets

would be about equally incorrect, Mr. Bogle, as I never saw you till a week ago."

"Call me Robert, please, or I shan't like to dub you Geraldine."

"That would be a calamity! Well, I will if I remember it," she answered, unwilling to accede to his petition, yet fearing to appear uncivil if she refused point-blank. "Here we are at church at last, and you must admire the result of our combined talents. Our decorations have been thorough if nothing else. I don't think one square yard has escaped them."

The congregation was pouring in fast as Geraldine and Robert passed under the great Norman door, and the winter sunlight was falling on the strong grey pillars and their wreaths of blood-red holly and pallid mistletoe. Among the schoolchildren, in their smock-frocks and scarlet cloaks, appeared prominently the sallow countenance of Miss Bartholomew. She kept a lynx-eye upon the movements of the surrounding juveniles, and ever and anon darted anxious glances in the direction of Mr. Meules, who, in his cassock, was moving on tiptoe hither and thither, handing about papers of carols, and at intervals gliding towards herself for consultations, with an air of unspeakable mystery and importance. Presently all heads went round, and the party from the Castle entered—the girls in quaint velvet dresses and large plumed hats, their ringletted duenna, Miss

Oliver, trotting on among them, like a hen among her chicks, almost dwarfed by her enormous sable muff. Geraldine, from her seat beneath the pulpit, watched them as they ascended one after another into their raised square pew, garlanded with hatchments and escutcheons. She saw, with secret interest, the solicitous care which Lord Rotherhame bestowed on his two little children, finding out their places in the big red prayer-books, and lifting them on to hassocks, whence their small faces bloomed like roses above the high oak wall. She noticed curious furtive glances pass at intervals between him and his eldest son, and fancied that there was a strained weird look in Lord Berkeley's eyes, as if he had sustained some mental shock; an old-young look, like that of some changeling child, whose elfin sprite is not at home in its tabernacle of human flesh. Dr. Bogle's musical summons to prayer recalled her wandering attention. She sank upon her knees, but her near companions appeared to be all bent on forcing their individualities upon her notice, and she found it almost impossible to concentrate her thoughts. Mrs. Egerton infused intense but arbitrary meaning into the responses she recited, lapsing at intervals into fits of abstraction, from which she would rouse herself to added fervour of utterance. Miss Nutting monotoned the versicles in unison with Mr. Meules, who, from his distant perch in the chancel, had

contrived to pitch his voice at a wild height above the E flat on which the choir was performing. Robert Bogle, aggravated by Mrs. Egerton's expressive lingerings and meandering, flung out his petitions at railroad pace, leaving his auditors at the close of each overbearing outburst with a growing tendency to headache. Ellen and Mary, whose lips during the Psalms had remained closely sealed, at prayer summoned sufficient courage to emit a series of peculiar hissing sounds whose meaning was wholly unintelligible. Miss Barnes, being of a generally docile and compliant turn of mind, struck out no special line for herself, but, borne away by sympathy with Mrs. Egerton, followed faithfully the turnings of that lady's changeful phases of feeling. Geraldine, exhausted by contact with so many conflicting minds, was thankful to hear the hubbub cease, and rising from her knees to behold her father mounting into the quaint pulpit beneath a ponderous sounding board. The Archdeacon wore an air of fatherly benevolence, and the heartfelt earnestness of his utterances went far to compensate his hearers for the old-fashioned lengthiness of his discourse. The hobnailed gaffers in the gallery settled themselves in a business-like manner to their morning's nap. Miss Bartholomew, her face wrapped in imposing and self-conscious gloom, sat listening with contracted brows, as though in following the preacher's thoughts she were perpe-

tually coming upon something disagreeable. Only very rarely did her critical countenance relax into approval, and that was when the Archdeacon made any reflections which bore on the dark side of human nature. Nina Nutting, conscious that Mr. Meules' eyes were upon her, seemed to be occupying herself in making trials, one after another, of appropriate expressions; now she would look firm and steadfast, as though about to die for her faith, then would become lost in stern thought like Miss Bartholomew, again a mild depression would ensue, or she would seek to assume the far-away ecstatic look, which she had been taught to admire in the pictures of the saints, and imagined fondly on the features of the Reverend Herbert Meules.

The Archdeacon's sermons were, as a rule, tolerably faithful indices of his private mental moods, and on this anniversary he did not fail to make allusion to the notorious crime which, since the day that he had last preached within its walls, had invested Rotherhame church with a peculiar awful interest, assuring his hearers, who were pricking up their ears at the introduction of a topic so sensational—even the sleepers in the gallery beginning to show symptoms of returning animation—that guilt cannot finally go unpunished, and that falling rocks and mountains will not avail at the Last Day to cover those who on earth might successfully have hidden their deeds from the eyes of avenging man.

"God sees," he added solemnly, "He will bring every secret work to Judgment whether it be good or bad. Cain shall meet Abel before the Judgment seat and answer for his blood, and there, too, the miserable being, who, just five years since, from this very village dared send a brother's soul, for ought he knew, unshriven and unprepared, into the Unknown Eternity, must stand uncovered to meet his accusing eyes." Mrs. Egerton at this point, roused by the special interest of her husband's theme, distracted her daughter's attention by a storm of appreciative coughs designed to incite it, and while nodding her assurance that she was duly listening, Geraldine failed to catch the meaning looks exchanged between Berkeley and Josceline, or the significant glances they cast over their shoulders towards the pew under the gallery, where Granny Weedon sat in her large many-coloured shawl and black poke bonnet, all unconscious of their dark suspicions, and nodding her head in dutiful agreement to the preacher's solemn warnings.

Service over, the Rectory party was stopped in the churchyard by Lord Rotherhame, who, with Lettice, came up to wish them all "a merry Christmas." Geraldine, suddenly possessed by unaccountable shyness, feigned not to see him when he took off his hat to her, and turning away, plunged with apparent eagerness into a spasmodic discussion with Ellen on the subject of introits.

The next moment she repented her foolish bashfulness, but unable to shake it off, was about to beat a retreat with Ellen to the Rectory, when on a sudden Dr. Bogle rushed in upon the group. He had seen from the Vestry a detachment of the Castle party wending its way homeward through the trees, and fancying that he had been cheated of one of his precious opportunities of a "chat with the Earl," he hurried out in hot haste—hatless, wrathful, and out of breath.

"How monstrously stupid of you girls," he panted, "not to have stopped the Harolds! It really was too senseless, when you might have known I should be anxious to say a word to Rotherhame. Here he's been and put a hundred pound note into the bag, and though of course I should not have referred to it in so many words, yet I wanted to show by my manner that I was pleased with him! What *are* you poking me for, Alice, eh?"

"Lord Rotherhame is here, Richard," answered poor Miss Barnes, attempting to make her voice heard through Mrs. Egerton's storm of explanatory coughs.

"I am really much obliged to you for your kind intentions, Bogle," said Lord Rotherhame, emerging from behind the screen of Mrs. Egerton's ample skirts, with a smile under whose good natured veil lurked a contemptuous irony.

The Doctor, though not over sensitive, did for once look a little foolish. "Well,



well," he answered, "I know well enough that you are one of those who, as our good friend remarked in his discourse, have been taught to look on giving to the sanctuary as a privilege and honour. Still a little natural satisfaction one cannot but express. First-rate collection altogether, Egerton! One hundred and three pounds ten shillings and sevenpence halfpenny. It was your sermon that did it—humanly speaking, of course. Our good folks here don't as a rule offer of their substance so willingly as one could wish. They have always one answer ready for the Clergy, when we urge on them the duty of alms-giving: 'If we don't do it, Dr. Bogle, his Lordship will.'"

"Pleasant for me," said Lord Rotherhame, shrugging his shoulders. "You and your parishioners will make a pauper of me between you, Bogle. Well, Lettice, the cart is waiting. This young lady has ordered me to take her for an airing on the heath, Mrs. Egerton, that she may get up an appetite for her Christmas dinner—that penitential pleasure, which no good Christian dare forego."

He lifted her into the little dog-cart, with its high-stepping Arab horse, and Lettice, as she drove past the churchyard wall where Geraldine stood gazing on Mrs. Bogle's marble tomb, nodded a regretful salutation. The girls had mutually taken to each other on the evening of the tenants' ball, and Lettice had hoped this morning for an opportunity

of prosecuting their acquaintance. Geraldine looked after her regretfully, and then went home to sit for an hour round the Rectory dining-table, eating cold mutton and fossilised citron cake, and sipping fiery sherry, the sole refreshment allowed till after the evening service.

To the Christmas dinner at eight o'clock were bidden the curate, the organist and Miss Oliver. Miss Oliver had kind maternal yearnings over the Doctor's motherless girls, but it was not often that she could avail herself of their father's invitation to "come down and look after them." Christmas Day, however, afforded her a chance of combining this act of kindness with what she most thoroughly enjoyed, a sermon from the Rector, and so, muffled in her sables, she duly tripped to church that night, and walked home afterwards with Miss Barnes to the Rectory.

"My absence is less felt by the dear children to-night than on any other day in the year, my dear madam," she observed beamingly, as she seated herself on the Doctor's left, opposite Mrs. Egerton. "Their papa kindly arranges to dine earlier on purpose that they may sit down with him, so I felt I might conscientiously leave them in his charge. There was an outcry at first that it was quite against the *bien séances* for Miss Oliver to run away on Christmas night, when the whole household dines together, you

know, but I told them I did so enjoy the evening church and sermon that they must really give me up for once."

"And I am delighted you did come!" replied Mrs. Egerton heartily. "Alice Barnes has told me that you find it a little difficult to get away sometimes," she added, Lowering her voice to a mystery-inviting confidence.

Miss Oliver giggled and nodded. "Well, yes, that is a point on which his lordship is a little fussy, Mrs. Egerton, but how can one wonder when the mamma of the family is gone"—here she regarded the Doctor with expressive sadness—"if the papa does get fidgety and over-anxious at times? Gentlemen cannot be expected to burden themselves with the responsibility of looking after young people. My great stay is the Dowager Duchess, their papa's aunt, you know. I really can't tell sometimes how I should get on without her Grace to refer to, and her Grace said to me only last summer, when they were in town: 'Miss Oliver,' she said, 'I look to you, and not to their papa, to turn out those girls creditably, and I trust, when the time comes for me to take them into the world, that you will saddle me neither with blue-stockings nor with blokes. I would rather not have beauties either on my hands,' the Duchess added, 'they are generally more plague than profit, but their appearance I know you can't help, and I'll forgive you if you turn them out as good-looking as I

anticipate.' Those were her Grace's own words, Mrs. Egerton, and I often laugh to myself when I think them over, though it is no laughing matter to me to feel I have the responsibility on my shoulders of not disappointing their aunt's expectations."

"Now listen to me, my good lady," said the Doctor emphatically. "Don't you be worrying yourself because the Earl likes those girls kept at home, and don't care for them to go junketing about with all the good-for-nothing worldlings of fashionable society. They'll grow up all the simpler and better and higher principled for the quiet domestic life they are leading. So don't you be bothering your head, and putting *your* fingers in the pie. They'll have to face the pomps and vanities of the world soon enough in all conscience."

"At the same time, I quite feel with your anxieties, my dear Miss Oliver," said Mrs. Egerton. "It is a great worry to have the entire charge of other people's children, and you would not, of course, like to see them grow up *gauche* and unsociable. I can assure you though, we were both quite struck by Lady Lettice's sweet manners the other evening at the ball, and thought both the other little girls most pleasing in looks and behaviour."

"You are most kind indeed to say that," returned Miss Oliver, delighted to find her feminine tremors comprehended. "Politeness

in young persons is one of the things I am most particular about, and I don't think that her Grace will have any RUDENESS to complain of at all events. You can't think how the dear children took to you, one and all, Mrs. Egerton, and little Edward is full of the Archdeacon and your daughter. Miss Egerton does not know what a conquest she has made in that young man! Dear Doctor, allow me to pass you the pepper. We must minister to those, you know, that have so well ministered to us."

"I was telling my friend on the right," said Dr. Bogle, "that Christmas dinner at the Castle is a sight worth seeing, what with the peacock pie and the other old customs kept up. I wish we had gone ourselves and had a peep at it."

"It is such a pleasant patriarchal idea," said Mrs. Egerton, "for masters and servants to sit down together on this blessed day. I almost wonder you don't propose to go *en masse* yourselves and join the party."

"You see it would clash with the hour of our service," returned the Doctor apologetically. But Miss Oliver shook her ringlets, sprinkled her eyes, and endorsed Mrs. Egerton's sentiment by saying aside to her: "That's just what I've often thought, we all know 'the more the merrier,' and for the two widowers to meet at such a time as this would seem so right and natural—but some

people have such odd fancies!" and she again knowingly wagged her head.

Mrs. Egerton nodded back—a nod fraught with apparently responsive intelligence—of whose meaning, however, being unaware that the combined efforts of the Doctor and Miss Oliver had failed to extract the desired invitation from "the Earl"—she herself had not the most remote conception.

"However," continued Miss Oliver, with renewed cheerfulness, "had the dear Rector spent the evening at the Castle, we should have missed one of the most beautiful discourses it has ever been my privilege to listen to. How clearly you proved that blessed doctrine of the immortality of the soul! I only wish all those dreadful sceptics and rationalists, who are trying to turn everything topsy-turvy, could have been there to hear."

"I've tackled them by the dozen before now," returned the Doctor, "but they are slippery as eels, and there is no nailing them to the point."

"A-ha! They find that discretion is the better part of valour. There is no getting over the Doctor, Mrs. Egerton. I recollect the dear Duchess herself saying to me in her queer humourous way: 'My dear,' she said, 'when I want to carry on a theological controversy, which is about as likely as that I should show my back to this wicked world

and turn nun, I shall send for your clergyman.' ”

“Now don't you fancy you're paying me a compliment by repeating that,' said the Doctor, turning his head on one side and speaking with facetious emphasis, “or that because a body happens to be a Duchess she's a whit more capable of judging who's a theologian, and who's not, than any other ignorant clever woman of the world.”

Miss Oliver was a firm believer in the infallibility of Duchesses in general, and of her pupils' aunt in particular, and accordingly, although she took her pastor's remonstrance in very good part, she remained as hopelessly heretical on the point at issue as did any of the sceptics she had been denouncing on the Articles of the Christian Faith. The Doctor was well acquainted with the good lady's little weakness, and, strange to say, treated it mercifully, only laughing long and loud to himself at each word she uttered in self-defence, and continuing to hector her till the arrival of an alcoholic pudding changed the course of his ideas, and gave the victim of his jocosity a chance of escape.

## CHAPTER XVI.

Life is thorny, and youth is vain :  
And to be wrath with one we love,  
Doth work like madness in the brain.

COLERIDGE.

It was a dull, hard morning. There had been a frost in the night—a black frost, whose frowning presence was relieved by no silver spangles, nor rimy wreaths—which scowled heavily from lowering sky, naked bush, and rigid ground. The very clouds seemed congealed into a leaden mass, through which the divine spirits of light and heat could find no passage, and the colourless uniformity of earth and heaven oppressed the eye with a satiety of dreariness unutterable.

Lord Rotherhame had come in from a gallop across the moors. He had thought to have enjoyed it and to have gained a healthy exhilaration from the winged speed of his beloved Arabian; but the animal, highly wrought and keenly sympathetic, had detected beneath her master's urging touch, a hidden lassitude, and caught its dull infection. Her pace had been rapid as ever; she had cut the air with flying feet; but the soul and the joy had left her, and the striking of her hoof upon the ground was harsh, as though iron had stiffened her supple sinews.

Lord Rotherhame came into the library.



Comfort and luxury were there—warm fire-light, gaily-coloured Persian rugs, bright red leather furniture, contrasting pleasantly with the insipid gloom without. He went to the fire, stretched out his cold hands and tried to think that he enjoyed it. Then, with a restless movement, he turned to the great portfolio of engravings against the wall, out of whose rare contents he meant to choose the best specimens for framing. He began the work of selection with eagerness, but in a little while a shade flitted across his face and blotted out its interest and attention. Perhaps the thought had crossed him, that when his work was done, it would be for himself alone, that there was no one who would care to see or criticise. *She* was gone who was the object and end of all his thoughts, without whom existence was left a purposeless, unmeaning thing—a thing to hold in the hand, stare at, and wonder what to make of. On the table lay a little poem which had flashed into his mind the previous evening—an Ode to the Air—which he had penned with eagerness. He tore it up with a movement of scornful impatience, threw it upon the hearth, then went to the great oriel window and gazed out into the winter morning.

There was a strange look on his face as he stood thus solitary, his eyes fixed on vacancy—a look as of forbearance well-nigh exhausted, of sadness so heavy that an added feather's weight would make it unbearable, sadness too

stern, too resentful for complaint. He was beginning to find out the disappointing insufficiency of these crumbs of hope on which he had during the last month fed with appetite. For a long period after his wife's death the thought of her desolated home had filled him with shrinking horror. But at length, wearied out by the friendlessness of perpetual travel, his heart had turned with irresistible yearning towards his native place. He had come back, and the joy of the villagers, the presence of his children, the nearness of the churchyard with its hidden treasure of precious dust, had soothed him with strange power. A new peace had seemed to rise out of the very soil, and he had begun to look forward to his boy's home-coming with longing, and to dwell with delight on the thought that since Ralph's being centred in his, as in its highest good, there was still something left to live for—an object for labour and for sacrifice. The discovery of the hollowness of this illusion was humiliating as it was bitter—it steeped in gall the thought of all the things and persons from which he had drawn a brief enjoyment.

Suddenly a warm touch roused him with a start, and a hand was thrust into his icy fingers. He turned, and saw Ralph, his eyes fixed on him with that kind of mute appeal with which a dog regards the beloved master it has offended. A slow smile involuntarily relaxed his lips. Ralph had come to seek

forgiveness, to make expiation by submission for his one act of treachery. Yes, he would accept it—at any price he must buy back this heart, and restore its lost purpose to his aimless life; he would forgive Ralph's temporary faithlessness, and bury it in a deep oblivion.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, glancing away, too proud to clasp the boyish hand which he suffered to lie coldly in his own.

"I *want* you, father"—was the half-childish answer.

"I am at your service, Ralph."

"Not like that," returned the boy petulantly, "I am tired of being without you, my father—I hate never to be looked at by you. Do let us be as we used, do forgive me without making me wait a tedious age first for dignity's sake. I don't care now if you do call me sentimental."

Lord Rotherhame was forced to turn from him and look out of the window. A dangerous thaw seemed suddenly to melt the strong ice that froze up his emotions—he was conscious of that kind of inner revolution which warns the shipwrecked sailor that the iceberg's heart is no more sound, that the mighty fabric is breaking at its core.

"Does this mean," he said presently, "that you have returned to your senses, and intend to behave yourself in future, Ralph?"

"I will never displease you again if I can

help it," returned Ralph, with hasty evasion. "I don't care to bring such misery on myself a second time. But will you first tell me whether you have any absolutely insuperable objection to my one day marrying Carry Bradshaw? She is very pretty—lovely, some people would call her—accomplished, for she can draw and sing—not rich certainly, but that does not prevent her from being a lady, and indeed from what she has let drop, I believe she is descended from a good old race."

Lord Rotherhame smiled contemptuously.

"It doesn't do to take people exactly at their own valuation," he said. "Her grandfather, I happen to know, was the local dentist of a petty provincial town. For more than a thousand years," he went on proudly, "it has been our boast that our blood has received no taint, no impure drop, and shall I suffer the royal stream that rolls in our veins to mingle with the puddle that stagnates in hers?"

Berkeley looked a little shocked.

"God made all mankind," he answered quickly, "the blood that He sets flowing is made base by wickedness, not by obscurity of source."

"True," answered his father, "I spoke like a barbarian. But culture, fineness of thought, high-bred manners, come as much by descent as by education. Intimate contact between natures in which these are not

equally developed, would be fatal to happiness. Of very few could it be said that they are manufactured by heaven direct. Is Miss Bradshaw one of those divine *chef d'œuvres*? Is her soul a soul to be worshipped—pure, beautiful, and guileless?”

“Such transcendently high ideals are beyond the range of common experience,” said Berkeley, “one may wait for ever if one waits for perfection.”

“Is she a lady then?” persisted Lord Rotherhame. “For your wife to be a lady in mind and manners is not altogether an unreasonable ambition in me. Should I think her one?”

Berkeley burned to say yes, but rigid truthfulness withheld him.

“I would rather not make myself responsible for what you might think—especially when prejudice would naturally incline you to think the worst. At Deerhurst she is looked on as one of the leaders of fashion, and I have heard a real connoisseur pronounce her graceful in figure and in manner. If unselfishness is the chief womanly virtue, I can only say she has made sacrifices without end for me, and as for her grandfather having been a dentist, I don't consider that worth a thought. It is a nice thing to have ancestors just as it is a nice thing to have pictures or old china; but the lack of such luxuries does not disqualify a girl for making a good wife.”

"Poor boy," said Lord Rotherhame, pitifully. "There is something both of pathos and comedy in these wise mature words from your infant lips. What do you know of love, marriage, or the world? You are no more in love with Miss Bradshaw than with that table, as your cautious and elaborate laudations testify. You refuse to see the patent fact that her affections are lavished on your position, not on yourself, that you have been the victim of a vulgar and selfish manœuvre. You are very innocent—I begin to think I have been too hard upon you."

These last words amply consoled the constant lover for the disconcerting frankness of his father's earlier declaration. He saw gleam of hope.

"Oh, father dear!" he exclaimed, "you will pity my miserable predicament, won't you? You will see Carry herself; you will wait for a year or two before you finally decide to refuse your consent. Perhaps by that time she may weary of waiting, and herself ask to be released."

The *naïveté* of this suggestion brought a smile of grim amusement to Lord Rotherhame's lips, but he repressed it.

"I will think over your request, my boy," he said, "but supposing for the moment that I decide against it, you must tell me plainly that you are prepared to submit to me—I mean as to signing the postscript. I don't choose that the Bradshaw family should think

that you would ever deliberately disregard my wishes when you had once fairly ascertained them."

Berkeley turned scarlet.

"Oh, but indeed," he answered, with a nervous eagerness, "I could not really do a thing which implied that I was a party to your breaking off the engagement. Whatever happens, you must see, father, that after my solemn promise I am bound to her, if she keeps me to my word."

Lord Rotherhame's eyes shot fire, but he restrained his anger.

"You do not mean to tell me," he said with forced patience, "that you think conscience requires you to act in disobedience to me? You had no right to make any promise independently of me—in that way the worst of deeds might be justified—murder, robbery, anything to which a rash and wicked vow had pledged you."

"No," returned Ralph, his voice trembling with emotion. "Robbery and murder are wicked in themselves, but there is nothing morally wrong in marrying to please one's self, when one has once grown up. The promise ought not to have been made, I grant, but still, when I am of age, and free to direct my own actions, it will be my duty to keep it, even at the hateful cost of displeasing you."

Lord Rotherhame's pride forbade further argument, and he saw plainly by the stub-

bornness of Berkeley's tone that it would be labour lost.

"You have misled me then," he said coldly, while an ominous frown gathered on his brow. "I hardly gave you credit for the impertinence of coming to me with caresses when you meant to defy me, nor for the meanness of cajoling me into compliance with your wishes by a feigned submission to mine. For what you may be pleased to do when you are—as you phrase it—grown up and free—go to the devil, for all I care! but as long as I have the charge of you, you shall either obey orders or carry your effrontery to another quarter. I am master here, and am not disposed to tolerate any disturbance of domestic discipline. So make up your mind quickly to conform to my orders, or to leave my house, I leave the choice perforce to you."

Berkeley caught a fierceness in his father's tone which he had never heard in it before. He stood with flushed face and downcast eyes, burning to speak and yet afraid.

"Allow me to remind you that this is my private room," said Lord Rotherhame, looking at him with a red and angry glare, "and that I have my business to attend to."

Berkeley moved a step, and then stood still.

"Do you hear me!" said his father, "I tell you *go!*"

"You are too hard upon me, father," he murmured, and left the room.

Lord Rotherhame had seldom felt less in-



clined to join the family party in the Dining Room than when some twenty minutes after his son had left him the gong summoned him to luncheon. But he would not allow Berkeley the honour of thinking that he had in any way affected his appetite; went down punctually, forced himself to eat, and talked even more than usual. His daughters laughed and chatted with him, suspecting nothing of the storm that was agitating his mind, but he was annoyed to discover that Mr. Daubeney was watching him. Mr. Daubeney, although he was sincerely attached to him, had an unfortunate knack of rubbing him up the wrong way—a knack the more disagreeable because Lord Rotherhame owed to himself that he said and did nothing worthy of displeasure. There were times when a kind word or Christian counsel soothed him—times also when the most delicate sympathy jarred upon his nerves. Mr. Daubeney, though himself a sensitive, was also a one-sided man, and he could not follow his friend's wayward moods, nor comprehend why a nature at one hour so soft and so responsive, should at another, without apparent reason, become hard and repellent. He had sufficient perception to notice that to-day Lord Rotherhame's laugh was dry, his eye angry rather than merry—sufficient also to answer him with cheerfulness, and conceal his anxiety—but not enough to discover that Lord Rotherhame was conscious of his sur-

reptitious glances, and fretted by them. When the party broke up he followed him into the library, thinking that he would find it a relief to open his mind if the subject were broached for him. He did not doubt that Berkeley's conduct was the cause of his father's unhappiness. Lord Rotherhame knew what was coming, drew on his impassive look, threw himself languidly upon the sofa, and opened a newspaper. Mr. Daubeney coloured—a tacit rebuff was enough at any time to make him feel a coward—but he wrestled with his shrinking distaste, believing that for Berkeley's sake as well as for Lord Rotherhame's, it was advisable to give his offence the safety-valve of free discussion. How many secret martyrs have nerves, humility, and pride! How smilingly and silently they bleed!

He waited some minutes in silence, warming his hands, and at last, finding his companion hopelessly engrossed in his leading article, said quietly—

“So Berkeley has had another talk with you this morning?”

Lord Rotherhame glanced up suddenly.

“Did you send him?” he asked.

The challenge took Mr. Daubeney by surprise.

“No,” he replied, “I did not certainly *send* him; I met him in the garden this morning, and asked him whether he would not soon get you to talk over his difficulties

again. He said that he had made up his mind to do so at once, for that he could endure his wretchedness no longer."

"What is he wretched about?" inquired Lord Rotherhame, resuming his newspaper, and speaking with sardonic indifference. "Because his flirtation has come to an abrupt end, and he is denied the privilege of publicly flaunting the ludicrous importance which he imagines his calf-love confers upon him?"

"I heard nothing of that. I gathered rather that his chief trouble lay in his alienation from you. Ralph is a very child at heart," continued Mr. Daubeney earnestly, "to be petted and caressed is as necessary to him as food and air. He has looked as forlorn and woe-begone of late as a dog that has lost his master."

"The sooner all that nonsense is knocked out of him the better. An overgrown baby is a ridiculous anomaly; sense is a more appropriate attribute of eighteen years than infantine sensibility."

"May I give you a plain piece of advice?" said Mr. Daubeney, thinking it best to ignore replies which were beginning to awaken his resentment. "It is to treat the whole affair less seriously. I do not mean that Ralph ought not to be made to suffer for his very wrong behaviour—it would not be right to pass that over lightly—but I mean, let this matter about the postscript drop. It ought

to be quite sufficient for Mr. Bradshaw, if he is a man of any decency, not to say religious feeling, to receive a letter from *you* breaking off the engagement. Three years remain, during which Berkeley will be under your sole authority, and without means of communicating with this girl. In that time circumstances will almost infallibly intervene to prevent the chance of his again seeking her out. She herself will probably be married; his taste and judgment will be matured; he will see with his own eyes the justice of your objections; other people will be occupying his attention. There is really no necessity at present for you to do more than keep them apart—time will work the cure, and he will be spared the possible injury to conscience and the formal breach of faith in which signing your postscript might involve him.”

“If he does not sign it, he shall not stay in my house,” said Lord Rotherhame stubbornly.

Mr. Daubeney felt his anger grow within him. “Are you not going to honour me with any reply to my arguments, Lord Rotherhame?” he said.

“Oh, the arguments! yes. You may remember a saying of Shakespeare, to the effect that the sight of discrowned kings is demoralising to the people. Well! it has never occurred to me to meddle much with my children’s affairs, or to plague them by an elaborate code of imbecile restrictions.

At the same time when I give an order, I am not disposed to have it tossed back in my face. I do not believe in the authenticity of the conscience-theory behind which my son finds it convenient to entrust his disobedience. He is stubborn, conceited, and rather heartless, therefore he prefers his own will, and his plebeian little sweetheart, to the prosaic alternative of obeying his father. If he carries his point, and proves his will stronger than mine, he will become an awkward appendage to the household, galling to my pride, and by no means an incitement to the younger children to behave as they ought. He will have to go—how, when and where, cannot be settled at the present moment.”

“But it would not be the action of a Christian to banish your child from your personal care and from the endearing, sanctifying influences of home life and love, because in one instance he had failed in his duty,” said Mr. Daubeny, trying to speak with studious moderation. He did not realise the extenuation which lay behind his friend’s hard language, in the fact that the sight of his shattered idol was pain beyond what his sore heart could bear.

“But I never said I was a Christian, or that I wished to behave as such,” returned Lord Rotherhame with irritating composure. “You take too much for granted, Daubeny. I am Ralph’s father—that is enough—may I not do what I please with my own?”

"He is only your own as a child is its nurse's, to be cared for and cherished for God," Mr. Daubeny was beginning, when Lord Rotherhame testily interrupted him.

"Yes, yes, forgive the slip. True enough, nothing belongs to us but ourselves, and they are not over-desirable possessions! However, though we are not allowed the *privileges* of proprietorship, there are certain persons and things attached to each one of us, something in the fashion of burrs to a skirt, the *responsibility* of whose management is popularly supposed to lie with ourselves. Ralph is my affair, and however kind your interest in him, you cannot know all the minor complications which affect my treatment of him."

"I entreat you," said Mr. Daubeny, with emotion, "to bear any personal discomfort rather than exile him from home, with its healthful restraints, its powerful incentives to purity and goodness. To hand him over to a hired tutor for the last years of his minority, and then to turn him out into the world embittered, to fend for himself, is like casting a defenceless child to lions."

The quiver of Lord Rotherhame's lip belied the cold words he had uttered. "Nonsense, Daubeny," he said, "what do you take me for? I am not going to cast Berkeley to any lions, literal or metaphorical. Even if he carries his perversity to the bitter end, I have no intention of cutting him off

from his belongings. I mean no more than that I shall abridge my own intercourse with him to the limits of bare necessity, a penalty which, to judge by his behaviour, will not sit on him very heavily."

Mr. Daubeny fancied he caught a tremor in Lord Rotherhame's tone as he said these last words, and he looked up hurriedly. But the pale, proud face wore no trace of such emotion, and forced to content himself with the slight relenting indicated by his closing sentence, and with a vague trust in the chances of the future, he left the library with a heavy heart.

When he was gone Lord Rotherhame dropped his *Times*, and, leaning forward, covered his face with his hands. It seemed to him like the ghastliest of ghastly farces that Daubeny should be pleading his Ralph's cause with him. Would he not a week before have laughed to scorn the idea of such a possibility? Even now it seemed like an evil dream from which time must awake him happily.

Mr. Daubeny went to his study with a mind weighed down by the sense of failure. In no respect, except perhaps in the last stray shaft, had his efforts been successful; they had but served to make manifest to him the extent of the danger which menaced the peace of the family whose interests were to him as his own. He had often dreaded for Lord Rotherhame the recurrence of any

fresh strain upon his nature—a nature already unstrung by grief, morbidly sensitive in proportion to its rigid self-repression, courting, as it were, attack by its diseased irritability, inviting the infection of any evil miasma, any dark or passionate influence that fate might blow across its surface. The crisis had arisen, and Mr. Daubeny felt oppressed by the conviction that in the small bud of Berkeley's single fault lay hidden the seeds of incurable misunderstanding and estrangement.



## CHAPTER XVII.

The house is crenoled to and fro,  
And hath such quaint waies for to go,  
For it is shapen as the mase is wrought.

CHAUCER.

NIGHT was coming on, and the dull grey of a wet afternoon giving place within doors to a pleasant candlelight. The day had changed about two o'clock, the west wind suddenly rising had summoned up clouds from their secret lurking places beneath the horizon, and the rain came down in torrents. The stony heart of the day had melted, and was gushing out in a tempestuous flood of tears. To be, as it were, forcibly debarred from issuing forth into the dismal outside world was a sensible relief. Mr. Daubeny sent his horse, which had been brought round, back to the shelter of the stable, and willingly returned to his unfinished sermon. Lord Rotherhame shut himself into the library. Miss Oliver retired with her pupils to the Watch Tower, and bade them bring their work and a story-book, and the two youths betook themselves to the billiard room. The summons to schoolroom tea made an agreeable interruption to their rather spiritless game, and little Phillippa met her brother at the door with the pleasing intelligence that she had herself baked cakes for their entertainment, in con-

firmation of which announcement she forthwith produced certain paste-coloured, leaden-looking lumps from the hob on which they had been keeping warm.

"Where is Mr. Murray-Carr, Lord Berkeley?" inquired Miss Oliver, laying aside her knitting, and taking her place behind the teapot. "Not gone out in all this rain, I trust! Young gentlemen are apt to be thoughtless on such points, and I always think of the absent papas and mammas."

"He has not committed that enormity, Miss Oliver. We have been amusing ourselves in a genteel and harmless fashion, playing billiards ever since luncheon."

"Ah, that's very nice! People must be without any intellectual resources who complain of having every now and then to spend a day indoors. There could not have been now a happier, pleasanter little party than ours, sitting here together at our work and reading, I am sure. Young ladies, I must insist on those rolls being halved; your digestions will never stand more than a small portion of that most unwholesome looking pastry."

Berkeley, who was carrying round the plate to his sisters, stopped, and languidly made the required division. His taciturnity surprised both Miss Oliver and the girls, who were accustomed to look to him for entertainment, and to laugh with dutiful appreciation

at all his jokes. "Headachy," was Miss Oliver's conclusion when she had for some seconds surveyed him critically, and she was mentally weighing the rival merits of her hidden hoard of pills and powders, when the door opened, and the keen grey eyes of Josceline peered into the room. "So there you are at last, Mr. Josceline—come in, come in. We are quite needing a little of the 'feast of reason and the flow of soul' to cheer us up this doleful evening."

"Gladly would I treat you to both, Miss Oliver; I assure you, I value highly the companionship of cultivated women, more especially when supplemented, as in the present instance, by practical experiments in the gastronomic science. But I am afraid I must forego both. Favour me with your company for a moment, Ralph; I have a question to ask you!"

Josceline's concluding sentence sounded so pregnant with mysterious meaning that Berkeley's abstraction vanished instantaneously, and he followed his friend in high excitement from the schoolroom.

"Now is our time," whispered Josceline, grasping his arm. "Granny is at her tricks, and we have not an instant to lose!"

"What makes you think that?" returned Ralph, eagerly, hurrying meanwhile after his friend, who took the direction of the Ruins.

"Why, this. When you left me I went to take another look at the Wardrobe Room.

On days like this it looks doubly ghostly and forlorn, but all the same, I summoned courage to sit down, and even to play a few bars on the harpsichord. But the feeble, quavering notes, all cracked and out of tune from damp, plunged me into the blues. They sounded like a soul in pain—if there be such things as souls and pains—and I thought of your grandmother, how she used to sit bolt upright in her armchair by the fire, or hobble about on her gold-headed stick; and altogether my thoughts were none of the pleasantest. I believe they don't air that room enough, it always seems so musty and oppressive, and so I was going to push open the window and let in a healthy rush, when suddenly a step on the stairs chased all thought of sanitary improvement from my head."

"Well, spare us the prologue! Did Peter's ghost appear?" Ralph interrupted, nervously impatient, for at the moment his dream-vision—he knew not by what name to call an experience at the time so awfully real, but which later research had proved fantastic and illusive—flashed back upon him. He was on his way to the Wardrobe Room, keent to penetrate and unveil the mystery that enshrouded it, and the remembrance returned of the dream-moment, when drawn thither by an inexplicable and subtle attraction, he had by the force of will broken the spell which lured him onward—turned back from the investiga-

tion to which it urged him. So sharp were the outlines of Memory's photograph, that he almost fancied, as he moved on in the weird half-light, that the dread hour had come back, and that the blind man, with the dripping clothes, was before him, drawing him forward with silent entreaty. Josceline's tone of cheerful unbelief fell with a wholesome reassuring ring upon his ear.

"Peter's ghost! Rather no! My visitant was no one more uncommon than our dear old Madam Weedon. I nearly ran over the old hag, she was creeping up so softly, and in the dark, too. You never saw anything like the scared, wolfish glare she gave me, or the sawny manner she drew on the minute she found out who I was, wishing me a 'good evening' in such pious accents that I felt impelled to kneel down on the spot and ask her blessing."

"In place of which she would have cursed you altogether, had she but guessed your thoughts. Well, is that all?"

"No, hear me out! I rushed off, making a great tramping, to mislead her; and then after I had gone some distance, crept softly back to the stairs and listened. There she was still, lingering and listening, as I could tell by her hoarse breathing through the door, and the creaking of her boots. After two minutes I heard the door close, and the key turn gently in the lock. Everything, you see, is ripe for the execution of our project.

Depend upon it that now is the exact moment to take our peep at our venerated friend, and ascertain whether or no her seasons of solitude are profitably spent."

The pair had by this time passed into the ruined wing of the Castle, which, on this wild evening, seemed a very temple of the winds. Rain was pouring through the glassless windows, making a pool among the nettles on the floor. The wind blew the thick ivy noisily hither and thither, screaming dolefully down the wide, open chimney; and as the companions clambered on hands and knees up the broken, lichen-covered stair, the wet beat in upon their unsheltered heads. But for the free ingress of the lingering owl's light, it would have been difficult for them to have found their way, and as it was, some ten minutes passed before, by dint of patient groping and careful climbing, they reached the ruined nursery, where, by means of a remnant of flooring that jutted from the wall, they proceeded to crawl round to the window, under which they had previously placed a stout rope, in preparation for their enterprise. Ralph, who, warmed by adventure, felt his spirits suddenly revive, lost no time in securing it firmly round his waist, and then squeezed himself through the narrow aperture to the left of the wide stone mullion which divided the window into halves.

"The best part of the arrangement is that, should you slip, you could not by any possi-

bility pull me out with you," remarked Josceline, as Ralph's curly head disappeared through the opening. "I don't believe I could wedge my shoulders through if I tried."

"My only fear is," returned Ralph, "that the stone may be wrenched out; but, however, I am not likely to need to rest my weight on it. The ivy is so thick and strong, it gives me a splendid hold. See that the rope is fast round the mullion. Look sharp about it, Josce. Don't let us waste time."

It was a strange sensation to be suspended in the air between heaven and earth, to be alongside of the rustling tops of trees, to feel the wind sweeping round with free, unrestrained vehemence, as if conscious that here it had a right to be; to be crawling alone on a perpendicular height not meant for human passage, and to startle from their lofty roost hundreds of sparrows, which flew chirping and chattering from their leafy haunts. Forty feet below was the safe, firm ground; and above, the high, twisted chimneys, with their canopies of ivy, rose darkly in a mist of rain. Slugs and snails were creeping among the interlacing roots, and with the bitter scent of the leaves mingled a damp odour that ascended from the earth below. Ralph was an experienced climber, but his nerves just now were not in their usual comfortably dependable condition, and he felt relieved when a glow of firelight

just below him showed that he had reached the point where it behoved him to descend. He grasped the tough roots tightly, holding none longer than a second, and letting himself down bit by bit, dropped at last gently on to the wide window-ledge of the Wardrobe Room. He felt like some spirit of the night, permitted to roam at will among the elements, and to take, when it lists—itself invisible—a survey of the sayings and doings of mortal men. Viewed from this perilous aerial perch, the avoided room wore a less sinister aspect than was its wont, and he saw that its normal air of ghostly abandonment was changed for one of active occupation. The large door key was lying on the table, beside Nurse Weedon's shawl and bonnet; and the old lady herself was kneeling on the rug, blowing up the fire with a pair of wheezing bellows. As soon as she had kindled a blaze, she stood up, went to the table, took off it the big well-worn work-basket, which was her constant companion, and lifting its patchwork coverlid, appeared to be rearranging the articles within. All this appeared innocent and common-place enough, and yet the conviction forced itself more and more irresistibly upon Ralph that something beyond the ordinary was in preparation. Presently Mrs. Weedon stopped to cough, and the loud, guttural sound reminded him that by a few feet only was he separated



from the unconscious woman, whose movements till that moment had seemed to him like the motions of some far distant person viewed through the medium of a telescope. The fit over, the old woman took up the basket, moved slowly across the room, and proceeded to open the doors of the great ebony wardrobe at the further end. The ray of her candle lit up the discarded state garments which hung within, and Ralph was contemplating thoughtfully the familiar satins, and recalling his grandmother's face and figure, when, to his extreme astonishment, Mrs. Weedon mounted into the wardrobe, vanished bodily behind them, and pulled the doors to after her. An overpowering curiosity urged him to follow her. At all risks he must see more. The window could only be opened from within. He dashed one of the panes in with his fist, slipped his hand through the hole, and undid the fastening. In the twinkling of an eye he had dropped into the room, and at the same moment the wind, whistling up the staircase of the tower, sounded to his strained ears like the doleful screams which had pursued him, as he was dragged away from his grandmother's presence, an hour before her end. A tug at the waist, as he touched the floor, showed that he had come to the end of his tether. Breathlessly he snatched out his pocket-knife, cut the rope, and sprang across the

room. The back of the wardrobe had opened; so had a panel in the wainscotted wall behind it; and the ray of Mrs. Weedon's candle was disappearing in the darkness beyond. Once more he thought of his dream, and, frantic with excitement, he drew yet nearer, thrust his head through the hanging dresses, which impeded his view, and discerned, between their folds, the old, bent form of Mrs. Weedon. She was lifting, with effort, a heavy iron bar, but an instant later it seemed as if a sudden thought had struck her; she turned and looked behind her. Ralph saw that she was about to close the panels, and that further progress would be barred. He made a sudden rush, and leaping through the aperture, stood at her side. Mrs. Weedon uttered a shriek of indescribable fear and rage, and, with the grip of a tigress, fastened her fingers in his hair. It was no time for pretence or evasion. The dame evidently recognised the fact that she had been suspected and tracked, and it was impossible for her to conceal her abject terror. Her knees knocked together as she strove to detain the strong, lithe young form; but her trembling lips refused to utter her remonstrances, and Ralph, grasping her hands, tore himself free, and shot past her. Her slow, halting steps were powerless to overtake him. He found himself on the summit of a dark, cork-screw staircase, and dashing

down it at break-neck speed, he heard her shaking laments—"Deary me, deary me! Oh, Lord, have mercy upon us!" grow fainter and fainter in the distance.

Down! down! down! The air each moment growing more chilly, the darkness more profound. Round, round, round! The incessant winding of the way dizzily luring him onward, till at last his head struck violently against a cold, stone wall, and he started back, a hundred stars dancing before his eyes. When he recovered himself, he found that he was on level ground, and he could feel the roof just above his head. But what was that ray of light stealing across the floor, yonder, in the shadow, and making distinctly visible the outline of those rude pillars, and that low, mysterious arch? What was this place? How came it that he had never known of its existence? With whom did its secret rest? For what purpose could man or woman choose to loiter here, below ground, in deathly cold and gloom? And what dealings could such an one have with simple old Granny Weedon? With a confused sense of bewilderment, half doubting the evidence of his own senses, he crept stealthily forward to the spot whence that uncanny ray proceeded, and found himself before a half-open door, hung about the handle with rusty chains. One fearful glance he ventured round the corner, and saw a sight

which made his blood run cold. Sitting huddled together on the ground, his long, hairy arms about his knees, and senile tears running down his smirking cheeks, was an old man—very old, very ugly, and very evil. It was Peter Tibbetts !

## CHAPTER XVIII.

This is the man to do the bloody deed,  
The image of a wicked, heinous fault  
Lives in his eye.

SHAKESPEARE.

YES, it was he! The frightful spectre which had haunted his mind of late; the terror of little Dolly's childhood. He, feature for feature, as he had beheld him a week since, crouching in the shadowy corner of the Wardrobe Room!

Such a horror and repugnance crept over Ralph's faculties that he felt as if he were almost paralysed. But a dreadful fascination kept him rooted to the spot, and he continued to gaze fixedly on the strange, small cell and its ghastly inhabitant. That he was no passing visitor, but an *habitué* of the crypt, was clear; for it had been evidently arranged for human occupation, and being warmed by a portable iron stove, was fairly comfortable, after its own low fashion. A cracked glass hung upon the rude stone walls, whose thickness would have baffled a whole chorus of screams. The rotten table in the centre was covered with slices of salted meat, a tobacco pipe, and a cheese, into which a pen-knife was sticking. Among the medley of meat, crumbs, and crockery, were a Bible and a book of prayers, an old comb, wanting half

its teeth, and a yellow tusk, which had probably dropped recently from the old man's jaws. The bed appeared at once the most comfortable and the most repulsive object in the room. It was a rickety four-poster, and its green, greasy curtains were pinned tight together, to exclude the outer vault-like chill. The only creature present, except the old man, whose mouth continued to be widened by an unmeaning grin, was a lean, tortoiseshell cat, which sat on the ground before him, raising her paws occasionally to play with the tassel of his soiled night-cap, and uttering a succession of sharp, eager mews. It was a wonder to Ralph that she could venture so near her hideous master, on whose debased visage Death and the Devil had set their ugly mark. The bad man had grown old before his time; the shape of his skull was clearly to be traced beneath the loose, yellow skin, which hung about it like an unwashed rag; sharp hair bristled fiercely upon his unshorn chin; his teeth, with the exception of one or two jagged tusks, had fallen out; and the blending of ferocity and imbecility in the sunken, glaring eyes, receding brow, and open mouth, was indescribably repulsive. With the instinctive shrinking of imaginative youth from wicked old age, Ralph's first impulse was to get away; but the thought of Josceline's indignation, if he went back to him without the fullest account attainable, of the mysterious transactions that

were being carried on below ground, stirred up in him fresh courage; and taking care to stoop his head, so that it should not strike against the low lintel, heavily festooned with spiders' webs of a far past generation, he pushed open the door, and stood within the cell, face to face with its lonely occupant. A yell, which for the moment electrified the intruder, burst from the murderer's lips. He struggled hard to get up and escape, but rheumatism held him fast, and he sank back powerless in his chair.

"Don't be afraid," cried Ralph, in accents which he strove to render reassuring, moved by Peter's violent trembling to a kind of shuddering compassion for the scared old man, "I am not going to hurt you, poor wretch!"

"'Tis he, 'tis he! come straight from hell to fetch me!" screamed the old man, his eyes starting from his head.

Ralph shivered all over as Peter's words made him realise that he was alone with one who had taken another's life.

"You cannot have forgotten me," he said, drawing a pace nearer, and bending his head to bring it on a level with the bleared eyes, that shrank beneath his curious gaze, "I am Lord Berkeley—Master Ralph, you know—and it's not more than five years since you saw me last, though, upon my soul, *you* seem to have grown a century older in the time."

"Cold and darkness make one old before

the time," quavered Tibbetts, rubbing his crooked fingers against his bony neck, as if for warmth, "and 'tis cold here, Maister Ralph, cold as the grave, and I've been down here nigh on thirty year. O, his Lardship's a hard'un to keep me down in the cold so long—a hard'un and no mistake."

"For that matter, his Lordship has no more idea that you are here than I had, Peter. He doesn't even know that you are alive."

The murderer laughed—a long, low chuckling laugh. "O, yes! 'Tis nothin' to he, up in his grand house, with the day comin' in to break up the night, and plenty to fill his inside wi', that a poor old man is left down here in the dark and the cold for thirty long year. I wants to see the sun, I does, and smell the flowers! O, I'm a go—o—od old man, master—there ain't no harm in me—a dear go—o—od old man. You won't believe folks when they tell yer I fetched his blood—fetched it every drop, they say—and what I done wer all in the way of business to save other folks trouble! I be cold, maister, and I be all acheses and pains, but I'm a good, good old man!"

There was such a ghastly mockery of simplicity in his voice as he concluded his half-crazy speech, that Ralph instinctively recoiled. Peter began to cry—a helpless unmeaning blubber—and the tears ran down into his open mouth. Presently the cry



changed into a laugh. "He, he, he! Yer han't seen nought of the purty red bag next door, have yer? I'll show it ye if ye'll promise," he added in an ingratiating whisper, "not to get me into trouble with the bobbies. O, 'tis a purty bag enough, but them I got it for don't make a sight of use on it. I made it red, I did, and I'll make ye a present of it, and ye may take it up wi' ye if ye ever git away again—but ye musn't let Gran know I give it yer. Be you comin' to bide down here wi' me? Ye'll find it dark!"

"Listen to me, Peter," said Ralph compassionately. "You are, I suppose, hiding here from the police. Now don't you think you had much better make up your mind to give yourself up? You would probably only be sent to a criminal lunatic asylum," here he blushed a little for the unvarnished incivility of his language, "and there, you know, you would have warmth, and sunlight, and be altogether far less miserable than in this vile vault, which is worse than any prison in England."

The creature's waning intelligence, roused by the directness of the appeal, enabled him to grasp his visitor's meaning. He shook his head despondingly. "Hist, hist! Don't let *he* hear ye say ye'd let me out. He'd as lief kill me as not, cuss him! I have been out once," he added, whispering again, and casting fearful glances round. "Gran, she

was in liquor, and she left the way open. I'd been watchin' many and many's the long year in hopes she'd do it, but she never did but that once, and now I'm lookin' for her to do it agin, and then may be I'll creep out. But—curse 'em all—they keep me down in this here dampy hole, and now I've got the rheumatics terr'ble bad, and can't scarce get off my cheer to go to bed."

"I was in the Wardrobe Room that night you escaped," said Ralph, "and saw you there. But I did not believe what I saw could be real flesh and blood. I took you for a ghost, Peter!"

"Yes, ye frightened me back, ye did, wi' yer squalls, ye rat!" and Peter's bloodshot eyes glared savagely. "I wer near freedom then, and, but for you, I'd ha' smelt the air, I would, if I'd swung for it afterwards!" He paused, and added with a chuckle: "They wouldn't string me up alone—I'd have a swell alongside to keep me company!"

Ralph, apprehensive lest the man's excitement should bring on an access of insanity, and feverishly anxious to extend his researches to the utmost limit before any interruption might occur to thwart him, here thought it expedient temporarily to withdraw. "I must leave you now," he said abruptly, "but before I go back I shall look in on you again, and remember, Peter, you are getting old and ill. It is time for you to be thinking of repentance, and death, and God." And with

this parting injunction which he thought it incumbent on him to administer, despite the loathing antipathy with which the sight of the leering face inspired him, Ralph turned his back and went out to explore further.

His field of research was not a wide one. Among the dusky arches without Peter's door he discovered two recesses only. One, he found by the aid of the guttering candle he had stolen from the murderer, was a dungeon some three or four feet below the floor on which he stood. Further back, to the left of his way of entrance, a dingy curtain hung, and creeping beneath its tattered, dust-laden folds, he found himself in a cell some twelve feet square, which appeared to have been in past times used as a secret oratory. Probably this secret crypt was a relic of days of bygone religious persecution, when the proscribed Jesuit priests, in whose behalf his own ancestor had suffered death, had been forced to betake themselves to such expedients for the celebration of the mysteries of their faith. In these dungeons they might for months have lurked securely, while above ground their enemies were asking for their blood, and in this sepulchral chapel have daily said their melancholy mass; the discovery of a small altar, draped in discoloured hangings of tarnished gold-work, strengthened this supposition. His eye rested on its consecrated outline with something of superstitious awe, which

ere long, when he became aware that some live animal was moving stealthily within its musty folds, lapsed into shrinking disgust. Rats and such-like vermin, formidable even in the house above, would doubtless swarm in this unfrequented region, whose vacancy and blackness, baneful to all creatures of cheerful tastes, would be an atmosphere congenial to their scared and unclean natures. Upon the altar stood a rude crucifix, and the stone floor was so encumbered with a variety of chests and boxes, some clamped with iron and double locked, others standing open and empty, that he found it difficult to make his way among them. A small but deep recess in one corner attracted his curiosity, and springing up on a chest by the wall he was stretching forward to examine it, when his foot, slipping, encountered some moving substance, and the next moment two monster rats, startled from their lair, scampered away before his eyes. Ralph, bending to extricate his foot, saw that it rested on a rough leather bag, which had apparently been thrust down into the crevice. He pulled it out, and mechanically read the inscription engraved round the brass lock: "Simon Morley, Messrs. Middleton, Scorby & Co., New York." Even without this significant inscription, familiar to him since the time of the tragedy of Culpepper Heath, Ralph would have conjectured that this bag

had been rifled from the body of Charles Weedon, for it had been soaked in blood, and his fingers rested on the dull dry stains. He dropped it as though it had been an adder, and the crackle of papers within struck on his hearing as the knapsack fell back into its dark hiding-place. For a moment he stood irresolute. A fearful curiosity prompted him to drag it out again, empty it, and examine its contents, but, withheld by a species of guilty shame from prying into the secrets of the dead, he determined to leave the responsibility of such an action with his father, turned, and with slow steps retraced his way towards the outer crypt. The remembrance that Granny Weedon alone was cognizant of his whereabouts quickened the uneasiness that began to stir within him. Were she really false and bad as appearances seemed to show; might she not be impelled by motives of fear to keep him fast in the trap into which he had rushed — perhaps at this very moment be barring his means of exit? But Josceline, after all, had a clue by which her knavery could be confounded; in him he had a dependable ally; supported by which comforting reflection he suppressed his impulse to rush up stairs, and paused before the still unexplored dungeon a few steps below the floor. Holding out his candle, and bending low, he peered with strained eyes into its sombre recesses. Here also he could detect signs of past human

habitation. Fragments of rotten wainscot were dropping from green and reeking walls, in one corner lay piled a heap of empty bottles, while, scattered on the floor was a quantity of stale straw which exhaled a nauseous odour. In the further wall was built a low arch, which, by its round shape and unadorned severity of style, was evidently Saxon. Within this arch some hand had laboriously carved a rude inscription, and Ralph, gazing intently as he bent over the brink, succeeded in deciphering the words: "Jno. Holles, Clerk, An. Dom. 1620," and beneath: "Ad. majoram Dei gloriam"—the well-known Jesuit motto. It gave him a sense of companionship thus to touch, as it were, another human mind across the gulf of centuries, and he pondered sympathetically on the probable fate of the hunted writer.

"Sleep there, ferret! since you are bent on prying!" hissed a voice in his ears, and before he had time to breathe a grasp of iron was laid upon his neck, and he was forced downwards into the dungeon below. "Stay there, sneaking spy! it is less than you deserve!"

Recovering himself after the sudden fall, Ralph had but a second in which to recognise the face of his father, literally black and convulsed with passion, before the door closed, the key turned in the lock, and he was left alone in pitchy darkness.

## CHAPTER XIX.

And let the day be time enough to mourn  
The shipwreck of my ill adventured youth,  
Let waking eyes suffice to wail their scorn,  
Without the torment of the night's untruth.

S. DANIEL.

HALF-PAST twelve on a January night! The keen air makes the darkness pungent, the very stars are sharp as needles, cold as steel. The wind, when it stirs momentarily in its sleep, cuts like an unsheathed sword; its lowest breath is a whistle. The night seems like a Pagan god who has stolen back to the scene of his former cultus, and whom the frost has surprised and benumbed into imprisonment. Too cold to move, too stupified to complain, he remains dull and silent, gazing at the ice-bound earth and lightless heaven. All refuge is denied him, the house is closely shuttered, and he dares not venture into its curtained shelter where human beings lie warmly beneath quilts of down, and the flames leap high in cheery strength. Stay a bit! The Black Spirit fears, indeed, the happy light, on whose red jovial face he may not look, but he scorns such obstacles to ingress as bars and masonry. Staring, voiceless, idiotic, he stands in the gloomy dungeon, which thirty feet below ground is shut away from sight, stands and gapes at that which,

albeit invisible to mortal vision—his cat-like eyes can see ; a shivering form on a couch of straw, a pale, small face, with closed eyes and long folded lashes. Unconscious, that face yet seems to express a kind of consciousness—to be uneasy beneath the fixed stare of the Black Night-spirit. At intervals the brows contract, the lips twitch nervously, and once even a tear, slow as a half-frozen stream, forces its way through the tightly locked eyelids, and rolls coldly down the blanched cheeks. Even in slumber the human soul of the sleeper, formed for freedom, gladness and kindred companionship, shudders at its isolation, seems to know that it is parted from its kind, that it is alone in that darkness, where only the unclean can flourish.

Through the thick mass of masonry that separates the dungeon from the upper world, the painful breathing of the ice-laden wind can no longer be heard. Silence, only less profound than the darkness in which it is buried, lies heavy as lead upon the imprisoned air.

To be shut up in the dark and in a contracted space, is to the imaginative no less an ordeal than suffocation. Parted from freedom the nerves become unmanageable, the fancy shoots up a weedy growth, whose unwholesome luxuriance chokes the force of reasonable reflection. Darkness is an enemy invincible because impersonal, awful because unbodied. Ralph had by turns tried to for-



get, to defy, to struggle with it. In all these methods of warfare it had met and had defeated him. It had seemed to creep nearer and nearer, to let his thrusts pass freely through its ghostly substance, to close in upon, and choke him. It had lain weighty, cold and stifling, upon his heart, pressing more frightfully with each wild pant for freedom. At last his agitation had exhausted itself, and a kind of stupor had supervened. For near an hour he had lain back upon his straw pillow, trembling, and the perspiration bursting from his face. He had given up the attempt to reason down his panic; it was more than half physical and could not comprehend the expostulations of the understanding. The awful and inexplicable change in his father's face and manner haunted and bewildered him. He felt as if the solid foundation of his past life had given way, as if he had slipped unawares into a quicksand. To face the problem of the murderer Tibbetts' presence beneath the floors of the house, whose every hole and corner he had known by heart from childhood, was, in such a state of nerves, impossible. Somewhere, in the darkest chamber of his brain, lurked the amazing conviction that his father's interests were in some unknown manner involved in his safe concealment, and this greater mystery shut out all lesser ones into a background, and completed the paralysis of his reasoning faculties.

As the hours droned on, exhaustion at last overpowered him. He drifted imperceptibly from horror into faintness, from faintness into sleep.

Sleep! silent land, twin sister of the churchyard. Land of which geography and geology can tell no tales—land, whose inhabitants are blind, deaf and dumb—where no stars shine, where everlasting night abides. Land, on whose mysterious border lies the unresting Valley of Dreams!

In the uncertain twilight that from our waking world reaches this sad Dream Valley, shadows are ever passing up and down. Shadows of fancy-formation in our daily life, which at night time mock their originals in the unnatural and exaggerated unreality of their elfin outlines. Into this dim vale, no being clothed in flesh and blood may enter; only the phantoms of ourselves, the ghosts, so to speak, of our own reasoning souls, can move over its mock pathways and among its mirage scenes of beauty and of horror. Here shines a "light that never was on sea or land"—a deceitful radiance, like the bright metallic gleams which momentarily irradiate a thunderous sky. Here, Fear broods, bat-like, with dusky outstretched wings, and the mortal enemies that skulk away from encounter with our rational moments, meet us in owlish, boding, illusive throng. Into such a treacherous region, Ralph, descending the dark hills of consciousness, stumbled un-

awares over the slippery edge, and found himself in a scene, whose counterpart in the actual upper world was Rotherhame churchyard. He was lying in his coffin, screwed down, stone dead, yet conscious of the warm oppression of the flannel-lined lid, and able to hear through the mould above, the muffled murmurs of the parson's voice, uttering the final sentences of the burial service. Ah! how he gasped for breath! How vainly he struck at the enclosing boards! how idle to attempt a cry for help with this mass of damp mould above and around him! Nearer, fast nearer, drew the sickening moment, when the mourners would go away to their pleasant airy homes, the sexton fill in the grave and stamp it down, and he be left alone—shut in with the worms. Then it seemed to him that a bluish opaque light filtered dimly through the cracks in the coffin, and that he could see all the corpses, with which the old churchyard was teeming, endued with a species of low reptile life, and wriggling out to visit him. Creeping through clods of clay, they were swarming from every side, their long stained winding-sheets dragging after them, their skinny fingers stretched towards him, their skull-mouths grinning with loathsome and greedy joy. Many of the faces were unknown to him, but a few he recognised; amongst others, the leering visage of the murderer Tibbetts. The jaws of the hideous dead were opening wide,

and their bony arms extended to clutch him, when a rushing sound was heard above his head, a cool fragrant wind dispersed the charnel vapours of decay, and about him two cold wings spread themselves protectingly in a stern, yet pure enfolding. A chill passed through his fevered brain and froze his beating nerves,—a chill of awful peace. He slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

An interval, immeasurable as a moment of Eternity.

He was wandering in a gorge—a deep gorge, dark and savage, strewn with huge grey rocks, and winding precipitately downwards. The scattered boulders, and the steep descent, made his gait wild and staggering. Each footstep was planted far below the level of the last, and he felt his body swing with the violence of his movements. Strange misgivings seized him as he descended, but the impetus of motion prevented him from turning back. At last in the thick gloom an arch rose before him, black and gigantic, and in a sudden dread his heart died down. But, borne forward by the force of impetus, he found himself carried within its span. Then, nerved by necessity, he tried at last to turn, but a hand on his neck pressed him forward; his father's face—a fiend face, beautiful and cruel—scowled over his shoulder, and the

familiar voice hissed in his ears the frightful words, "Too late!" The great black teeth of the gateway swooped down, one brief agony, they snapped, and he was on the *wrong side!* A lurid glare arose, a smell of smoke and sulphur, and he fell upon his face on the white-hot ground, bitten with the undying despair of Hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another interval! And now by a transition, fantastic as abrupt, he finds himself lying warmly in a little crib. The tall, supple limbs that have almost attained to the stature of manhood have shortened strangely, his cheeks are rounded, dimpled, the hand which he raises to rub his weary eyes is small and fat, and becomes entangled with baby-curly. He is lying at the foot of his mother's bed—the great, curtained, empty bed—and the fire-light falls softly on the china and the books, on the dressing-table with its gold scent bottles, on the cross by the prayer desk with its long black shadow, on the delicate white dressing-gown that is laid across the sofa. The door is just ajar, and a sharp streak of light moves through the aperture along the ceiling, and slowly descends the wall. It comes from a candle which is being carried downstairs, and, too late, he rouses himself to hear the retreating footsteps of his parents. A restless longing for their presence seizes him—he starts up

in bed and calls, but they have gone too far to hear him. Then, stealing in round the corner of the door, he sees the crouching form of some small animal. For no apparent reason the sight inspires him with a vague uneasiness, but a moment later he recognises the black and white face, the meagre tail, and pink ribbon collar of a thin kitten, lately seen in a cottage kitchen. Creeping to his crib, it springs up uninvited and sits upon his chest. He tries to feel pleased and to caress his little visitor, but the creature with an odd perversity—half spiteful, half playful—puts out its claws and begins, not to scratch the mere surface of his skin, but to dig downwards to the bone. The pain wakes him suddenly and completely—room, fire, great bed, pictures, china, all disappear. But one element of his dream remains—a live creature on his chest. Instinctively he lifts his hand. It meets no soft pussy fur, but a round hard back, thinly sprinkled with down. In a moment a short electric tail whisks through his fingers, and a horrid scamper and savage squeak inform him that in his sleep the *rats* have been at him!

There are times which cannot be measured by clocks—hours which trace an immeasurable length on the dial of Eternity, pushed by suffering beyond the limits of the finite. Such a time began now for Ralph. Had he afterwards been asked how long he had been left in the little Saxon dungeon, he might

have replied "a week,"—to judge by the wizening of his features and the scared stare of his eyes, it might have been a year. In point of fact, into the eighteen hours of solitude which followed his ghastly waking, he concentrated a great amount of that peculiar kind of agony which ages so far more rapidly than years, that on the scaffold, in a moment of time, it made the lovely Queen of Scots a decrepit, white-haired woman. A horror came over him—a horror of darkness which the imaginative and sensitive alone can understand. He was alone, walled up, unclean vermin swarmed round. The darkness choked him. He lay bathed in cold sweat, the abject prey of all those grisly and intangible fears which fancy can create but not destroy. Phantom presences followed him from the dreamland of their birth,—familiar faces, changed and horribly distorted, seemed to flit about him and to people the gloom with life. Fears assailed him that he would be left here, buried alive, till he died or lost his reason. "If God can keep wretched sinners burning in hell for ever and ever," he pondered—Dr. Bogle's libels of his Creator recurring with torturing realism to his mind—"is it impossible that my father might act likewise in his own degree?" Even in this moment of unsteadied judgment he tried to argue, and found that reason also had been transformed into a daunting enemy. How long

would the struggle last? How long before soul and body would succumb to the deadly choke-damp of this living grave? The loss of all human sensations, love, joy, hope and memory, the encroachments of madness on the enfeebled brain, the incoming of despair,—would they rush in upon him like an overwhelming flood, or, as a slow returning tide, creep leisurely onward and onward in cold-blooded contemplation of their certain prey? Would death ever have power to cool his brain, which already seemed on fire with infernal burnings? Restless brain! which sleep had lost its power to lull, and which would perchance, even in the tomb, amid the onslaughts of decay, maintain a low and terrible vitality, smouldering on in dust and ashes like those mephitic gases whose baleful light adds mockery to the darkness of death.

At last—for all suffering is temporary, even those bitter pains which short-sighted mortals have called eternal, and of which we may surely trust that no part is truly eternal save the healing virtue which ever renews sin-sick souls to perpetual youth and health—at last Ralph's capacity for suffering was again exhausted, and sinking back on the damp straw he sank once more into a lethargy—half-fainting fit, half sleep.



## CHAPTER XX.

Oft our displeasures to ourselves unjust,  
Destroy our friends and after weep their dust,  
Our own love-waking cries to see what's done,  
While shame full late sleeps out the afternoon.

SHAKESPEARE.

THE wintry sun shone cold and bright on the towers and buttresses of Rotherhame Castle. Except for the huge quadrangle round which in a kind of cloister were built the offices, and where the pleasant bustle of domestic work was already in full swing, the general aspect of the large mass of buildings was gloomy and deserted. The cheerful morning light showed up with precise fidelity the fissures that were fast widening in the stonework of the walls, the rich growth of yellow lichen, the weeds that unheeded sprang up between the paving stones of the court-yard, and the incrustations of green damp with which time and neglect had darkened many of the window-panes. Colonies of rooks and daws, chattering in glib conclave from their nests in the elm trees round the moat, seemed to contrast the free and sociable way of life with the dumbness of the melancholy, half-ruinous apartments which lay in the long gallery opposite their dwellings, and on whose mouldering furniture they looked with scornful eyes. At last, however, a sign of life

appeared in this almost disused portion of the Castle. A window close upon the ruins was thrown open with some force—and a pallid face appeared. It was the face of Lord Rotherhame, who, unable to sleep, had repaired at three o'clock that morning to the Wardrobe Room. Wrapped in a painful reverie, the night had faded unperceived by him. He had not observed the oncoming of the dawn—the merging of black into grey, of grey into gold. He had not seen the heaven's rosy glow, nor the blaze which was dissolving the delicate ice-pictures on the panes, nor the yellow beam that crept athwart the irregular oak floor. He had not heeded that he was cold and weary. It would be impossible to describe the look upon his face—anger, fear, remorse, and suffering, hardening into a kind of a reckless desperation. The summons to breakfast disturbed him at last. He disregarded it, but it roused him from his long abstraction, and moving down from his fixed attitude he flung open the window, and at the fresh keen air blow in upon his cheek, which though pale was burning hot.

Noon had struck before he fulfilled the intention which had been forming itself in his mind, and made his way to the dungeon where Ralph had passed the night. Misery is a mood in which a movement is effort, an effort, agony—when fascinated by her hideousness of aspect, we sit paralysed and stare her in the face. This mood

was still upon him when passing in by the secret entrance through the ebon wardrobe he descended to the dungeon, but having accorded it a certain indulgence, he put an end abruptly to its domination. In his nature there was a strange, contradictory blending of strength and weakness. For weeks and months he would curb with an iron hand the frantic impulses of secret passions ; then would come a sudden moment of weakness in which he threw the bit away and let them master him. It is in the restraint and silence of ages that Vesuvius prepares her furious avalanche of fire and death. But the moment of the catastrophe had not yet arrived, and indeed the absolute necessity of self-interest compelled Lord Rotherhame to repress the flood of reproach and bitterness that he burned to pour forth on his son. On one cause of his agitation he dared not seek the relief of speech, lest the suspicions that must be already thronging on Ralph's mind should be confirmed, and all hope lost of setting them to rest. One vent however he might allow himself. Ralph would be in an over-wrought, unnatural state, after his night's confinement underground, weakened by cold and hunger. He would seize this moment to take him at a disadvantage, and wring from him the obedience he had insolently denied. To master and humiliate this proud, independent, ungrateful nature would be a sweet and

vindictive satisfaction, a grateful salve to his own irritated jealousy. Taking the much-debated postscript from his despatch-box, he resolved that Ralph should that morning sign it, come what might. He brought a lamp with him to the crypt, and setting it on the floor approached his captive, who continued to lie motionless. The expression of horror—rigid horror—that Ralph's face wore took him by surprise, prepared as he was to find tokens of fear and pain. Gradually, however, as his eye met his father's his expression changed from fixed dread to furious indignation.

"Ah! so here you are at last, my kind father!" he burst out, in a sharp, hoarse voice, "I really don't know whether to say good-morning or good-evening to you. Thanks to your ingenuity, I have been able, without any expenditure of time or money, to make a nice little trip to the Polar regions. The ruse is really most successful. Sun and moon effectually banished; night rendered artificially eternal; as to the absence of heat, feel my hand," and he laid it upon his father's fingers which sent a chill to the marrow of his bones.

Lord Rotherhame involuntarily started, and then, as if fascinated, remained gazing mutely on the boy's wild face.

"Does my voice surprise you?" he resumed after a moment's pause, with a fierce laugh. "It is possibly thin and rough—a

natural result of cold, you know. Two or three days spent in the company of vermin are demoralising—removed from civilized society one is apt to lose its polish—living with rats one becomes naturally rude and greedy—one forgets to moderate one's tone, one begins to squeak. The human brain is not formed to thrive in perpetual darkness. I am afraid you will find that in that respect my little change of scene has not particularly benefited me. I can learn nothing here, you see, except the art of cutting throats. One's senses,—not being wanted when one can find no employment for them,—very rightly set about taking their departure. I am almost mad already, as you have probably discovered. Peter Tibbetts is so entirely !”

He paused, his voice failing from sudden exhaustion. The look of alarm which his strange and ghoulish volubility had at first called forth in his father's face, died quickly. Inured to suffering, he felt a Spartan contempt for the weakness which, after a night's discomfort, required the relief of an undisciplined outburst. It was necessary at once to put the curb on for Ralph since he had lost the power to curb himself. He bent down, fastened two awful eyes upon him, and said in a low voice of concentrated resolve—

“Give me another syllable of this insolent imbecility and I will strike you in the face !”

The threat, brutally worded, and enforced by a significant clenching of the fist, had an

instantaneous effect. Ralph looked up at his father with an expression of amazement and fear—the angry light died out of his eyes, and he shrank instinctively back into his corner.

“Now that you have ceased to make yourself ridiculous, you childish coward,” said Lord Rotherhame, after a minute’s silence, and speaking still with the same restrained ferocity, “I may enter on the business that brought me here. You see this!” and he placed the paper which he took from his pocket before Ralph’s eyes. “Unless you sign this according to my orders, I swear by Heaven that I will leave you here to enjoy again the sole society of Mr. Tibbetts and your friends the rats. I am a fool to have let you plague me so long. Go your own way as you will on matters in which you do not cross my pleasure, but do not dream that I will suffer myself to be browbeaten by a *thing* like you.”

The anger which succeeds habitual gentleness, however restrained, is formidable; when it seethes and seems to be on the point of boiling over, it becomes terrific. There was something about the savageness of his father’s mood, so new, so alien to all his previous experience of his character, which daunted Ralph with a physical terror. Mechanically he took from his hand first the postscript and then the gold pencil-case which, as if disdainfully impatient of such

material accessories, Lord Rotherhame pushed towards him. His fingers were too cold to feel it, but he grasped it tightly and looking up, said in a subdued and trembling voice—

“If I do this, will you release me from this place?”

Lord Rotherhame frowned.

“Write,” he answered harshly.

Ralph watched him a moment thoughtfully, then began laboriously to frame the letters of his name. His dulled brain scarcely comprehended what he did—his obedience was mechanical. As he wrote the red glare in his father’s eye became less wrathful, and he relaxed the stiff menace of his attitude.

“Now we shall know who is master,” he said quietly. “You will not amuse yourself by defying me again, I fancy.”

Ralph was regarding meanwhile with a blank stare the tiny coral ring upon the little finger of his left hand, his Caroline’s betrothal gift. Lord Rotherhame took the paper from him, and with a contemptuous smile was about to thrust it into his breast pocket, when Ralph, with a sudden bound, leapt from the floor, snatched it from his hand, and tore it into a hundred fragments. It was the spark needed to light the conflagration. Up into a blaze rushed the repressed madness of four years’ intolerable pain—the complicated wrongs and miseries which made a hell of this man’s heart and

conscience. One moment he stood, facing his now erect son in dead silence—the next he dealt him a blow like a sledge hammer. Ralph gasped out—

“Oh! my God!” then reeled and fell, his head striking first the stone wall, then the floor, with a dull thud.

After that once more dead silence reigned. With the sound of his son's fall the devil left Lord Rotherhame—left him the prey of a frightful fear. Stooping, he lifted Ralph into a sitting posture—strange, almost inconceivable transition—handling him already with a touch of concentrated tenderness. But in the moment's interval that separated him from his frenzy he had lived a lifetime. Ralph's head fell back upon his arm, and a white still face and two glazed unseeing eyes met his trembling glance. Was he dying? Had he killed him in his outburst of ungoverned rage? Could his momentary madness have merited so great a punishment? His brain reeled—but even in such instants of vague agony the mind retains a ghastly common-placeness. He laid the boyish form quickly back on the stones, and hurried to the door. As he tore it open, his brow came into contact with the warm touch of human flesh. He recoiled with a kind of sickness—it was old Peter, who had dragged himself laboriously to the door, where he now crouched, his ear strained to the utmost to



catch all it could of what was going on within.

No such variety had come to break the old man's monotony of existence through all the five long years that he had been walled up in these vaults, which were to him at once a refuge and a trap, which shut him out alike from friend and foe, and which, while preserving his wretched life, cut him off from all that makes life worth having. Squatting against the cell door, the sounds of violence and the smothered cry that followed awakened for a moment echoes from the Past—echoes which reverberated through the decaying chambers of the murderer's brain. Again he saw in fancy the blasted heath, the reedy pool, the ghostlike mist. Again he heard the bittern's boom, the night-wind's sob across the moor, its sad wail mingling with that last long-drawn cry for pity, whose only answer had been the slashing knife. He recalled the gurgle that had followed, the black staring eyes, and the splash of the ensanguined waters which had bubbled up and covered all—how he had fled from the accusing presence of his victim's orphan child, the bewilderment which had beset him, and driven him to aimless flights and insufficient shelters under the hedge or in the ditch; his last vision of his cottage home, where he had striven to rid himself of the blood-stains that could never be washed out, and had seen the light of reason, dimmed by his presence,

die out of his Sally's eyes. The hunt came back to him when his fellow men pursued his footsteps with hoots of execration, and the church with its grey solemn arches and ready-vested altar, the last object that stood out on the horizon of the Past to mark the moment of his unprepared descent into the night whose black shadows had ever since enwrapped him. Since then, shut away from the scene of his crime and from its avengers, he, who had taken another's life, had suffered the slow and certain extinction of his own. Month by month, and year by year, his powers of mind and body were dwindling, and his soul sinking down deep—deep—into a mire of accursed stupefaction—a sodden sleep, too heavy for aught save the Trump of Doom to break.

In the unnatural loneliness that clung about him like an icy shroud, it would have been a kind of relief to the grey-haired miscreant to have had his gaoler as a partner in guilt, and as the opening door disclosed the still features of the unconscious boy, blood-stained and disfigured by a blue and livid mark, a smile of greedy pleasure widened his dry lips, and he clutched his former master by the arm.

"Is the youngster dead?" he asked in a hissing whisper. "Beating don't kill, my Lard, you must finish him wi' the knife; make a big hole in his throat, round like an O—a capital O—and let the blood run."

Lord Rotherhame stared blankly at the idiotic face before him, and every nerve in his body seemed to contract and shrink away from the touch of the bony fingers that were fastened round his arm. He flung them off, and vouchsafing no answer, sprang on to the upper floor and entered Peter's den. In a moment he had returned with a pitcher, and, shutting the door in the old man's face, descended into the dungeon. Tremblingly he poured a cold stream on Ralph's temples, scarce daring to look upon his face, lest its rigid stillness should confirm the nameless dread that had crept into his heart. Presently he heard a sigh, and, with a sensation of unspeakable relief, saw him try to lift his head. Released from the tension of suspense, he now set himself to chafe his son's cold hands, till by slow degrees animation was restored. Ralph received these attentions in stony silence, the remembrance of his father's savage violence beginning to revive within his brain. Lord Rotherhame, seeing at last that he was beyond fear of a relapse, left him to recover himself, his head with its drenched locks resting on the stones, and, lost in thought, began restlessly pacing up and down.

Involuntarily he drooped his head upon his breast in a shame which knew nothing of contrition, which flowed from wounded pride. The fierceness of his anger and disappointment was not abated, but he despired

the ungoverned outburst into which it had betrayed him, and knew that Ralph must despise it also. He felt persuaded that Ralph would feel a malignant pleasure in the memory of his humiliating violence, and said inwardly that he would rather have died than have afforded him such a gratification. Never again—the thought rushed over him with inconceivable bitterness—never again would the great black eyes he used to love, look up to his with mute, adoring fondness. Never again, even were a reconciliation beyond all present imagination to draw them together, would he be to his boy an ideal model, by which to mould his thoughts and manners. The idol was indeed shattered irrevocably; the cold and searching light of truth would glare in on its deserted temple, and dispel all dear and dim illusions. Ralph's face would henceforward be to him an unbearable sight, the mocking symbol of a dead joy, and he could never nerve himself to the ordeal of beholding it perpetually. They must part—he knew that now to be inevitable. And yet how he loved him; how repulsive was the prospect of living on without the one remaining interest that had made existence tolerable. How he loved him! with a passion which that cold, unfaithful, unworthy heart must never be suffered to suspect!

After a while he began to cast surreptitious glances in the direction of the

dark corner where Ralph lay. Then he approached him, and, lowering the light, gazed attentively into his face. Ralph winced, and turned doggedly away, but his father had seen enough to know that he was himself again.

"Are you able to rise and go upstairs?" he asked, with stern brevity.

Ralph muttered a sullen assent.

"Listen first then to a word I have to say to you. I apologise for having struck you. I have the right to strike you, but it is not a right I care to exercise. Your conduct irritated me."

Ralph made no answer.

"You have acted with your eyes open to the consequences of your conduct," resumed Lord Rotherhame, still more icily. "In the course of a week or two you will leave this house, to re-enter it only as its master."

At this announcement, Ralph suddenly raised his head and looked his father in the face: then, as if unable to take in his meaning, he closed his eyes with a look of stupefaction, and leaned back against the wall.

"The events of the last few weeks," began Lord Rotherhame once more, "have, however, done nothing more than precipitate what was sure to come. This little episode has shown me what in my obtuseness I had not before suspected, a total incompatibility of nature between you and me, which the future sooner or later must have made

apparent. I have three distinct reasons for ridding my house of you, Lord Berkeley. The first I have already mentioned—a natural disinclination to countenance insubordination in a member of my household. The second is the discovery of your complete betrayal of my trust, not by any act of positive dishonesty, but simply by the absence in you of that sentiment of filial duty which I credulously imagined to exist, and in which I placed unlimited confidence. Finally by permitting myself to be thrown into a passion by you, I have doubtless lost the small measure of respect which you have hitherto felt for me. So let us understand each other. We have nothing in common, and we part ! ”

He paused, and then added with more difficulty—

“ Without my consent you have contrived to possess yourself of the secret of Peter Tibbetts’s hiding-place. My motive for giving him shelter, with many other confidences, which would one day have been shared with you, will now remain locked in my own breast. His life, however, depends upon your absolute silence and secrecy. I trust to your honour as a gentleman to reveal to no living soul one syllable of the discoveries your ingenuity has made.”

A frown of painful anxiety contracted his brow as he made this appeal.

Ralph, who seemed to comprehend it more

clearly than the announcement which had gone before, roused himself to reply—

“I promise silence.”

A sound, like a gasp of relief, escaped Lord Rotherhame, but he spoke no word. Pale and grave, he helped Ralph to rise; made him, though reluctant, lean upon his arm, and helped him up the dark steep stairs, a low whimper of disappointed spite from senile old Peter accompanying their progress with dismal monotony. Faint and dizzy, Ralph's energies were too completely absorbed by the painful effort of ascent to pay any heed to the grim scene around him. At length, freely sprinkled with dust and cobwebs, he reached the summit of the stair, saw the first streaks of daylight appear through the doors of the great wardrobe, and stepped out into the Wardrobe Room.

There it lay, quiet and unconscious, as though it concealed no guilty secret. The still sunshine of the wintry afternoon lay pleasantly on the faded Indian carpet, the rich picture frames, the mute fantastic clocks, the disused card-table, and the great semi-circle of gilded chairs that seemed ever to be waiting vainly for the dead and departed occupants who never came. The sudden stare of daylight bewildered Ralph; his eyes had grown used to darkness, and, as if shrinking from its garish brightness, he closed them bat-like, and shrank back. Lord Rotherhame took him by the arm, and, guid-

ing him into an empty room which opened from his own, made him lie down upon the bed, and drew the blankets over him.

"Listen," he said, returning as he was about to leave the room, and bending over the pillow, "I shall keep Murray-Carr from you, but remember should you come across him you must tell him nothing. Say to him that you were locked up for the night because you had annoyed me by spying on the person I trusted. And now I leave you to sleep. Granny will be here directly to light the fire and give you what you want.

He paused, and then added in a low voice of irrepressible passion—

"I would rather have lain you in your grave than have proved you faithless. God give you to taste the cup that you have made me drink!"



## CHAPTER XXI.

'Tis a stern and startling thing to think  
How often mortality stands on the brink  
Of its grave without any misgiving.

The dead are in their silent graves, and the dew is cold above,  
And the living weep and sigh, o'er dust that once was love.

Hoon.

THE shades of evening were falling round the ancient towers of Rotherhame, and a thick mist, ascending from the meadows round the village, shrouded the Castle walls in a cloud of vapour, and climbed in ghost-like shapes the steep slopes of the heath-clad hills at its rear. Ghost-like, too, in its power of passing through closed doors and shuttered windows, the fog crept inside the strong walls, stole along the silent galleries, and up the carved oak stairs that led to the empty state rooms, hung among the gilded crockets of the organ, and looked out from behind the tall eight-day musical clock, like a veiled wraith summoned by the evening hour from the damp churchyard beneath.

Standing by the broad balustrade at the head of the front staircase were Dr. Bogle and Miss Oliver. The Doctor had come up to see "the Earl" on parish business, and was on his way to church to read evening prayers. Lord Rotherhame had left him for a few minutes to finish a letter for the post,

and the Doctor, wandering meanwhile in the gallery, had met Miss Oliver, whom he had drawn aside into the darkness that they might enjoy unimpeded the luxury of a little private gossip.

"There certainly has been a decided unpleasantness," Miss Oliver was saying softly. "Berkeley has been kept to one room, the Green Room I fancy, but I'm not sure which, ever since this time yesterday. I never knew such a thing happen before, all the years I've lived in this house, and it makes me feel quite upset. I cannot help fearing that that unsound fellow, Josceline Carr, may have been filling the poor boy's head with infidel notions, or getting him into some other scrape, and I could have gone down on my knees to Lord Rotherhame this afternoon to find out the truth, for I can't help fretting myself about the poor lad, you know, having no mother, and just home for the holidays. But his Lordship is—as we are all aware—so reserved and odd, that I thought it best after all to hold my tongue."

"Very right and wise of you, Lucretia. He is as jealous as a bear of any interference with his children. Has no one thrown any light on the cause of the upset, though? Young Carr has the gift of the gab to any extent; I should have thought you could have got it out of him."

"The girls have themselves been questioning him, but he put them off. I feel pretty

sure that he has had some hand in the matter, though, for his manner to Lord Rotherhame at luncheon was so very constrained and peculiar. He would scarcely so much as answer when he spoke to him. If such a word were permissible on a lady's lips, I should say he was really quite 'morose.'"

"Had a jawbation himself, I suspect," said the Doctor, grinning. "There is no better test, Lucretia, of an educational system, than the behaviour of young persons when under rebuke and punishment. An upstart, growling demeanour is a sure symptom of defective handling on the parent's part."

"It must be very painful to the Bishop that his own son should be spreading atheist opinions in his diocese; such a shocking example from quarters where one looks for nothing but good."

"Oh, the right reverend fathers are far too busy ratting out favours from Government, to have any time to waste on such common-place matters as the teaching of the faith to their own children. They'll ordain 'em, and give 'em their fattest livings and canonries, and then they have amply done their duty by them, to their thinking."

"Oh, you naughty, naughty man!" answered Miss Oliver, giggling. "Ralph assures me, though, that it is half talk with Mr. Josceline, and that he does not mean the dreadful things he says. But there's Lord

Rotherhame returning, and the girls will be expecting me to tea. Good evening, my dear Doctor."

With which salutation, and with a hurried pressure of the hand, Miss Oliver slipped away in the opposite direction to that from which Lord Rotherhame was advancing.

The Doctor's face wore a slightly guilty look. He had been trying to obtain a peep into his host's family secrets, and busy-body as he was, Lord Rotherhame was the last man with whose private affairs he would wish to be detected meddling.

"Here is the cheque," said Lord Rotherhame coming up to him. "By the way, Doctor, is it true that you are going off to the sea? I heard a rumour to that effect from Ned Weedon just now." He turned, as he spoke, and led the way into the picture gallery. At its furthest end a fire was burning, whose low red glow made the gilded frames of the portraits stand out in sharp bright contrast to the dark paintings they enshrined—mob-caps, tall ruffles, and suits of mail, which, as the flame leaped up with greater strength, suddenly emerged into sight, and with its sinking returned to black obscurity.

"You heard right enough," replied the Doctor. "I have been working like a horse during Advent and Christmas, and next week, when all our treats and penny readings are over, Alice Barnes and I promise our-

selves the relaxation of a little trip to Brighton, leaving the girls at home to carry on their work with Miss Bartholomew. Alice won't be sorry to rest. She has had a deal to get through, although of late she has been receiving some little assistance from Egerton's daughters, and their good little governess.

"Nothing like turning one's visitors to account," returned Lord Rotherhame, a little sardonically. "If one could but manage to keep up a succession of active young lady guests in the house, one might avoid the expense of a salaried governess, and at the same time enjoy the credit of being hospitable."

"I don't know about that, but I confess that I do make it a rule that every young person visiting at the Rectory should contribute her quota of aid to church-work. There is no pleasure in idleness, and recreation is never properly enjoyed till it has been earned by useful employment."

"From what spelling book did you borrow that original axiom, Bogle?" inquired Lord Rotherhame, laughing to cover the querulous sharpness of his tone. He was plainly not in a happy temper to-night, and seemed irresistibly drawn to vent himself in sarcasms. Pugilist as he was by nature, Dr. Bogle showed no fight, and Lord Rotherhame, shamed by his forbearance, was driven to apologise. "You will think I have rather

forgotten my manners," he said carelessly, "and in truth I do believe that the hermit life I have led abroad has rubbed off some of the varnish of civilization."

"You always will have your joke," returned the Doctor, graciously, "and I'm the last person to grudge it you, I like a bit of fun too well myself. By the way, do you know that Egerton was saying to me the other day—Christmas morning it was, as we walked home from service—that he'd never seen a man carry his years so well as you do. He wouldn't believe that Berkeley and Lady Lettice were your children, until assured of it by us. I was trying to remember your exact age to tell him—you're the right side of forty yet, are you not?"

"For a short while, Doctor. I shall be forty if I live till next July year. Yes," he added, as if forgetful who heard him, "youth with its dreams and delusive brightness is already left behind, and after the bustling years of middle life, comes hard, dreary, idealess old age."

"To the man who is making the right use of his opportunities, as you are, neither middle life nor old age need seem dreary. My good father, now, lived, as you know, to be near ninety, and a happier, cheerier, more contented old gentleman there was not in the United Kingdom. He lived his life out to the last. The very day he died he was sitting up in his arm chair, eating his egg as

heartily as you or I might, and listening with all his wonted interest to my published sermon on the Church Rates, or in other words, the Church Robbery Bill. Ah, his was a green old age, and a happy departure. May my end be like his!" he concluded, with a sigh of filial piety.

"And mine also," returned Lord Rotherhame, "the egg and the ninety years always excepted. I detest eggs, and am not so fond of life in the abstract that I have any ambition to outlive my senses and the patience of my heir."

"I must be going," said the Doctor, "it is close on seven."

Lord Rotherhame pushed open a pane in the painted oriel which they had reached, and through the thick white mist which hid everything from view was heard the deep, clear sound of bells. "They have only just begun," he answered. "Come in before you go, and see the children at their supper."

The children were seated with their governess round a table in the hexagonal room on the ground floor of the Ruby Tower. It was a singular looking room—the fluted roof supported by one single column that sprang gracefully from the centre, the floor bright with many coloured marbles. Skins of wild animals laid down here and there took the place of carpet, and the chimney, through whose wide shaft on summer days the blue sky was clearly visible, absorbed

four-fifths of the heat given out by the fire that blazed at its base. Miss Oliver was dealing out bread and milk to her pupils from a large old china bowl, while Josceline in moody silence consumed a lobster.

The whole party rose to greet the Rector, and a chair and refreshments were promptly offered.

"Not a morsel of anything—thank you all the same," was his reply. "We have choir practice to-night directly after evensong, and then I go home to a heavy meat-tea. Here's a head of hair!" he added, laying his large hand on the head of little Cicely, who, on finding herself the object of public attention, coloured up and bent her big blue eyes upon her plate. "I should have half of it cut off, my Lord, if I were you! It's a deep drain on her small stock of vitality, little dear!"

"Ah, that was exactly what the Dowager Duchess suggested when we were with her last month at Grand Court," said Miss Oliver, looking anxiously towards Lord Rotherhame. "Do you remember, Cicely, my love, her Grace observing to you in her funny way, when you had come out with one of your silly speeches: 'It's a pity, child, that there should be so much outside your head and so little in it!' And seriously, Lord Rotherhame, her Grace told me she was sure the girls would have a very poor growth in after life, if the present luxuriance were not more strictly restrained."



"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush—I should not care to sacrifice these long locks, of which I am so proud, to a future crop which it may never be my fortune to behold."

Lord Rotherhame had been watching Josceline's glum face with a half-frown while Miss Oliver was speaking—perhaps the sight of his boy's companion recalled unwelcome thoughts—but now he turned and bending over his little girl, twined his long fingers in her tresses with a look of wistful tenderness. Suddenly the door was pushed open with some violence, and little Edward, barefooted and in his nightdress, rushed into the room.

His cheeks were scarlet, his bright locks disordered, and his eyes wide open with a stare of terror. "O, Olive!" he shouted, running up breathlessly to his governess and seizing her by the dress, "dear Olive, more goes! This time it is Ralph's, and I'm afraid that he is dead."

"What do you mean, Edward?" said Lord Rotherhame, the mention of his eldest son making him break in upon Miss Oliver's outburst of interrogation a little sternly. "Come here and explain yourself to me."

"It *must* be his gose, Daddy," returned the boy, trembling in every limb, but struggling for composure. "His eyes stared, and they didn't see me, though they were quite open, and he was all pale and had a horrid

mark on his cheek, and a white winding-sheet on, something like a nightshirt."

Lord Rotherhame uttered an exclamation, and hurriedly bidding his children remain where they were, said with a forced laugh that he must go and see if he could lay the ghost. As he closed the door he saw Josceline following, with an expression of evident anxiety. "Have the goodness to remain where you are," he said, and having bestowed on him a glance which sent him back to the supper table with a rather queer flutter at the heart, he hastened off towards Ralph's room in the Little John Tower.

At the door of the Green Room he paused. It was ajar, and looking in, he saw that a fire had been lighted, and that Granny Weedon was nodding in her armchair by the hearth. She was sound asleep, and the bed was empty. Advancing a few steps along the passage, he saw a gleam of candle-light disappearing on the wall above his head. Quick as thought he dashed up the corkscrew stairs and with a sharp pang of fear, descried, a few steps above him, the white figure of Ralph, who, candle in hand, was passing out through an open door to the leads upon the summit of the tower. These leads were guarded at their edge merely by an irregular succession of low and crumbling battlements, and it was a dangerous place to venture on by night and in the fog. Ralph disappeared, but with a bound Lord Rotherhame had

cleared the stairs and was by his side—in time to prevent his walking through the battlements—but only just in time! Another moment, and he would have stepped over into nothingness!

The white mist was seething to the very summit of the tower; a sea of vapour which made every object but itself invisible, yet beneath whose filmy depth, as he knew too well, lay flat, hard paving stones. Clutching his boy's slender form in his strained, tight grasp, Lord Rotherhame gazed down shudderingly into the abyss from which he had saved him, and pictured to himself what that fall would have been—the noiseless unseen fall through the clogged air, the smash which would have told that Ralph's skull had come into contact with the pavement! But he was allowed no leisure for reflection. Suddenly waked from his uneasy sleep, to find himself alone with his dreaded father in this weird unwonted spot, the shock was too much for Ralph's brain, already excited to the verge of fever. He struggled in delirious frenzy, and Lord Rotherhame found it necessary to put forth all his strength to draw him across the leads to the sheltered interior of the tower. Half-dragging, half-carrying his reluctant burden, he at last succeeded in reaching the Green Room, where, exhausted, he laid Ralph down upon the floor. He relapsed into quiet the moment he was released from his father's grasp, but he was

evidently light-headed and noticed nothing that was passing. Mrs. Weedon, sunk into a state of yet deeper somnolence, was now snoring loudly, and a green bottle, peeping out from beneath the curtain of her armchair, caught her master's eye, and gave him the clue to her unwonted slackness in discharge of duty. A cloud of painful anxiety contracted his brows, and shaking the old lady by the shoulder he asked with some severity, how it came that she was not watching her charge according to his directions.

Granny with a guilty start looked up into his face. Its peculiar gravity and pallor struck her with a sudden panic, and she sprang up from her seat, exclaiming hurriedly that she had only that moment closed her eyes. "Sure nothing hasn't gone wrong, my Lord—I was broad awake not a minute ago."

Lord Rotherhame closed the door and hastily told her of what had occurred, the mortal peril to which her carelessness had exposed her patient, and the hair's-breadth chance that had saved him. Overcome with remorse, Granny implored forgiveness through a burst of sobs. "Lor' now," she stammered, "to think that you should have it to say that I was wanting in my duty to you and yours. The Lord knows that I never should have forgiven myself if harm had happened to the poor lamb through any fault of mine!"

"Don't cry, Granny," said Lord Rotherhame, patting her fondly on the shoulder. "It is the cause of your sleep that troubles me, not the sleep itself," and he pointed significantly to the bottle whose cork projected beyond the vallances of the chair.

Mrs. Weedon looked frightened, and began a vehement self-defence. "Sure 'tis not you, my own foster child, who'll be calling me a drunkard," she cried indignantly. "I call God to witness I've never done more than take a glass at times when I'm in a rack of pains all over, just to comfort my inside! Who'd have thought such a thimble-full as I took just now would have sent me off?"

"God forbid that I should call you a drunkard, Granny! The steps that lie between you and that slough of degradation are many, I trust and pray; but the temptation to take stimulants is insidious as it is strong. Remember all that depends on your presence of mind and self-control. One rash word and our name is dishonoured, I and my children ruined! I entreat you by the love you bear us, by the blind trust placed in you, as you value my safety—my life even—watch against the first feeble beginnings of this temptation! Give me one more proof of your devotion by taking the pledge never again to touch intoxicating drink."

"No need for that," responded Granny. "My love for you, my child, binds me more than any pledge. I'll not promise that I'll

deny myself the little I've been used to ever since I've been in service, but I promise you this—that never, never more will I go beyond what's safe. Don't I know what's depending on me? Wouldn't I pour out my blood like water rather than that a hair of your head should be hurted?"

Lord Rotherhame was reassured. He did not realise at the moment that the excessive unwillingness of this woman, who would joyfully have relinquished all else to serve him, to give up intoxicating spirits at his request, ought to have given him grave cause for alarm.

"I trust *he* understands nothing," he said, still whispering, and glancing towards Ralph, who lay stretched on the floor with shut eyes and flushed cheeks, uttering occasionally a restless moan.

Mrs. Weedon went to him, listened to his quick breathing, and felt his burning hands and temples.

"He's in a doze," she said, "but 'tis not a healthy one. He's in a high fever too. I think t'would be best to send for the doctor to-night, my Lord. I can't say, but it looks to me as if he was going to have an illness."

Lord Rotherhame started as she spoke of "the doctor," and coming up stood a moment by his sleeping son. Then stooping, he pointed to the red gash across his face.

"That is my doing," he whispered, "how shall we account for it to the doctor? He

angered me past bearing, and I dealt to him such measure as my mother would have dealt to me, had I dared to give her one tithe of the provocation that he gave me."

"And didn't I never cry over you, and a'most go down on my knees to my Lady for you, when you was treated so cruel? There! little did I ever think you'd do the same yourself. Boys will be boys. They weren't all born so patient and quiet like as you. You shouldn't be so hard upon the poor lad."

"Tut, tut, my dear Granny," he interrupted impatiently, "spare us the lecture," and then he added more softly, laying his hand on hers, "you'll explain it all to the doctor, won't you? Don't let them suspect the truth."

"There, bless you," she returned soothingly, "leave all that to me, I'll tie up his face with a handkercher, and say he's had a tumble, and I'm doctoring of his bruises. They won't be bothering me with questions, I'll be bound."

"Heaven grant he may be in no danger. I shall never hold up my head again if things go wrong with him."

"There, there, my Lord! You needn't be frightenin' yourself. He ain't goin' to die yet awhile. He'll live to give you trouble enough yet, I'll warrant ye!" She spoke cheerfully, but her words sounded with foreboding significance in her master's ears. Could it be that in thus sending him at the last moment

to rescue from destruction the being who had so strangely been put upon the track of his guilty secret, a just Providence had willed him to become the instrument of His own avenging destiny? He drove away the unwelcome thought, and giving himself up to the exigencies of the present, helped Mrs. Weedon to raise Ralph from the floor, and put him back into his bed.

"I will send a groom at once for Dr. Pyke," he said, when the task was accomplished, "and in the meantime send word to the cottage that you will stay here for the next few nights. He must be left for the present entirely to your charge, in case he should be delirious, and say awkward things. There will be no objection however to your having Parsons in and out to bring you what you want. And now I must go to the children—Eddy frightened them about Ralph, and I must make haste back and reassure them."

Lord Rotherhame did not linger long in the Ruby Tower. When the little girls had been comforted and the inquisitive Rector persuaded to depart, he took his hat, and went out into the grey, noiseless evening. He wandered across the soaking turf towards the church, the white mist meanwhile looking at him through the tangled branches of elm and beech with a thousand aerial, shifting faces. The light from the painted windows served as a beacon, and he walked on till he reached the low churchyard wall, where he stood for



a moment gazing over on mounds and monuments, which, some new, some falling to pieces from mouldering age, showed large and distorted through the fog. The yews and funereal cedars in their white garb looked like winged Death brooding over his victims ; a tinkle of sheep bells sounded in the distance, and a soft strain of organ music floated over from the church, which dimly seen, was magnified into colossal proportions by the untrue atmosphere. Lord Rotherhame sprang over the wall and hurrying to the low-lying ground by the chancel end, stood with uncovered head beside a long, low grave. Stooping, he buried his face for an instant in the wet grass, from which rose solemnly a scent of winter violets.

"Good-night, my sweet," he murmured softly. "Oh, flowers, your fragrance is sweet upon this grave, but my lily is planted so deep within the earth—so low, so deep—that she can never rise and bloom on its green surface any more—for ever.

"There, beneath that sod, my darling, are your feet, whose light fall I loved—there, your quiet breast, and your small hands folded in eternal prayer. And here—where the moss is thickest—your head, and the eyes I used to kiss, which the light may cheer no more—for ever.

"You sleep sound, my own, while I sin and suffer. My perfect wife, let not my sin, nor purity, part our souls, which love and

marriage have made one. Farewell—the night is coming when I shall sleep at your side again.”

He rose and hurried away through the maze of tombs and mounds, for there was a sound of trampling feet within the church, and the great door at the south was being thrown open. Leaping again over the wall he was in a moment out of earshot, hidden within the steamy belt that divided the churchyard from the Castle-enclosure.

Late in the evening Dr. Pyke saw Ralph. He shook his head a little anxiously over his patient, ordered absolute quiet and a sleeping draught, and specially enjoined that he should be rigorously guarded from mental excitement. The shock of waking suddenly to find himself on the verge of instant death, accounted to the doctor's mind for the slight brain affection from which the boy was suffering. He had, in addition, caught a violent chill, and it was important to bring out the fever.

“The entire nervous organization has always been acutely sensitive,” Dr. Pyke concluded. “The utmost care must be taken that the fever does not fall upon the brain now that it is in this peculiarly susceptible condition. Lord Berkeley is not one who can afford to play tricks with himself.”

In the short interval while Lord Rotherham was out of doors, Mrs. Weedon had busied herself in preparing her charge for the

medical visitation. She had got him comfortably into a small tent bed, which had been brought in from an adjoining room, and was seated by his side, bathing his forehead, and expecting each moment the return of Parsons with some healing ointment, which was being rapidly manufactured under her orders in the kitchen.

A low tap came at the door, and in answer to her impatient "Come in, you've been long enough I should think," Mr. Daubeny entered.

She was seated with her back towards him, and did not see who was the intruder, till suddenly raising her eyes to the tapestried mirror opposite, she recognised with a start the reflection of his face. He was already by the bed, and it was too late to make objections or forge pretexts for keeping him out.

"I heard a rumour that Lord Berkeley was unwell, Mrs. Weedon. What is the matter with him?"

"A bad feverish attack, sir. I'm trying to get him off to sleep; he seems restless, maybe the light is too much for him," and she hastily extinguished the candle on the table at his side, and drew the curtain so as to throw a shadow on his face.

Mr. Daubeny, however, had caught sight of a dark mark upon Ralph's mouth which mystified him. He pushed the curtain back again, so that the firelight fell full on the bruised feature. Mrs. Weedon watched him

with an unquiet questioning gaze as he stood thus in silence, evidently lost in thought. Presently he let the curtain drop and slowly walked away. Mrs. Weedon saw upon his face the shadow of a dark suspicion, and read its meaning truly.

“His Lordship is hasty at times, you know sir,” she said as he left the room.

## CHAPTER XXII.

With one foot in the grave, with dim eyes strange  
To tears, save drops of dotage, with long white  
And scanty hairs, and shaking hands.

BYRON.

It was on a raw damp morning, early in January, that Geraldine Egerton and Ellen Bogle, warmly cloaked and furred, crossed together the threshold of a quaint ivied cottage in a wooded hollow of Rotherhame Forest. They had come to visit Mrs. Weedon, "the Earl's old nurse and special favourite," as Ellen, during the walk, had informed her companion. Miss Egerton had been familiar with the old lady's name ever since her first arrival at Rotherhame Rectory, and had mentally concluded her to be the very neediest of all needy objects of charity in Dr. Bogle's parish, for fruitful as were the objections Miss Barnes had frequently to encounter when she attempted to abstract a dainty from the dining table for one of her sick *protégés*, opposition yielded instantly did she once hint that the desired scrap of fish or pudding was designed to tempt the appetite of "*poor old Mrs. Weedon.*" Geraldine's surprise was therefore great when she followed Ellen into the cosiest kitchen imaginable—a kitchen whose floor was white as snow, whose pots and pans shone like gold on the dresser, and

whose chimney corner was lined with warm cushioned seats that stretched invitingly on either side the fire. Two plump pussies nestled on the hearth, in what to less well-fed animals would have been a dangerous proximity to a newly-killed couple of rabbits, and the dame herself, resplendent in a rustling black silk gown, mob cap, and muslin apron, looked the very picture of health and prosperity. She curtsied low to both young ladies with the ceremonious courtesy of the good old school, and after offering sundry superfluous apologies for the disorderly state of the kitchen, requested her guests to "be so good as to walk into the parlour."

The parlour, which was only open to company, looked dull and stiff as State apartments commonly are, and Geraldine, who would far rather have stayed in the kitchen, with the pussies, than establish herself on a horsehair sofa by a fireless grate, thought the shining kitchen utensils far prettier ornaments than the wax flowers under glass cases, framed black shades, and antimacassars, of which the parlour boasted. There were, however, signs of better things. From the half-opened door of a corner cupboard glimpses could be obtained of old porcelain, relics of costly dinner and tea services, which a past era of heathenish ignorance had suffered to descend from the possession of the Harold family into the hands of unappreciative domestics.

"We came to wish you a happy New Year, and to ask how you did, Mrs. Weedon," said Ellen, in accents of concentrated amiability. "Papa was so afraid you might have been poorly, not having seen you at church the last two Sundays—and knowing how regular you generally are," she added hastily, alarmed lest her remark might seem to cast a slur on the sensitive piety of the "Earl's old favourite."

"Well no, Miss Ellen, 'tis where I can't often get in the winter weather, when I'm plagued with the rheumatics. But there, 'tis not for such as *me* to complain. The A'mighty takes His good pleasure with all of us. He sends pains and sickness to some in this world, you know, missy, and to others eternal torments in the next, and as long as we keep out of hell-fire, 'tis for us to be thankful whatever it pleases Him to appoint us."

Geraldine could not refrain a smile on hearing this exposition of Mrs. Weedon's theology, and wondered momentarily whether the old lady's orthodox faith in infernal fires had ever had force sufficient to lessen her enjoyment of the creature comforts of this present life.

"I have brought this young lady to see you, Mrs. Weedon," said Ellen, nudging Geraldine to arouse her attention. "She is Miss Egerton, and it was her papa, you know,

who preached that excellent sermon for us on Christmas Day."

"Ah, sure! t'was a bee—u—tiful discourse, missy, and I've thought upon it many and many's the time, as I've sat up of an evening with my Bible—that blessed Book, ain't it, Miss Ellen? But—if this young lady will forgive my saying it—I like my own clergyman best after all. The Doctor's sermons are flesh and blood to the Rotherhame people."

"Dear Mrs. Weedon," responded Ellen, gratefully, "I know papa is always pleased to have you among his hearers."

"Were you not nurse to Lord Rotherhame once?" interrupted Geraldine, secretly tiring of the solemnity of the interview.

"His nuss, aye, and more than his nuss," answered Mrs. Weedon, her eyes kindling into a sudden glow. "I was his foster-mother, and loved him more than his own mammy ever did, I'll warrant. There wasn't much love wasted on *his* childhood, pretty dear, for all that I'll not go for to say a word agin her Ladyship, who was a kind mistress to me, though a prouder lady never stepped. There, Miss Ellen," she added, resuming the somewhat sanctimonious manner she had momentarily dropped, "I often say that it must ha' been grace in the heart that made my Lady, that was always so cold and high, feel for me as she did in my dreadful trouble. Perhaps this young lady will condescend to



look at the likeness I have of her Ladyship—a miniature you see, miss, taken with my Lord, nigh upon the only time she had him on her lap. And there's the p'otograph we old servants had took of her in her coffin, maybe you'd like to see that too. She was embalmed and buried in glass, as had always been her wish, for my Lady wouldn't have been pleased even in death to be like us poor people in our common earth graves."

Geraldine, who had something of a morbid taste for horrors, expressed her eager wish to see the photograph, and the admiration she accorded to the ghastly memento encouraged Mrs. Weedon to produce other relics, so that more than half an hour was spent in looking over them, the dame all the while pouring forth a succession of family histories and enlarging on the charms of her little nursling.

"Good mornin' to you, Miss Bogle," said a loud mouthing voice, suddenly interrupting the flow of Mrs. Weedon's eloquence; and looking round, Geraldine beheld a stout policeman, with a fat, white face, among whose folds were stuck two small, dull eyes, like isolated plums in a suet pudding. "Just about glad to see you up here," and with an air of pompous and princely patronage, the minister of justice shook the hand which Ellen extended to him, and having acknowledged Geraldine's presence with a friendly nod, took a seat without waiting for any encouragement from the young ladies.

"My son Edward, if you please, miss," was Granny's explanation. "I'm showing the ladies some of my pictures and knicknacs, Ted."

"H'indeed! Ah, you know mother's weakness, Miss Bogle. She's pleased as Punch so long as she can persuade anybody to talk over the fam'ly with her. I remawks to her sometimes, 'Mother,' I says, 'if me and he wasn't fawster brothers, I might be jealous of the h'Earl,' I might indeed."

"I care more for his Lordship's little finger, Ted, than I do for your whole soul or body neither, and that's the truth," returned the mother with gratifying candour.

"Well, well. Take your h'own way, old lady," answered the policeman, with undiminished goodwill. "We'll not quarrel for a trifle."

"Do you like being a policeman?" inquired Geraldine, who was fond of studying the salient points of all classes and callings with which fate brought her into contact.

"Well, ma-am, t'aiut so much of a h'anxiety down in a sleepy 'oller like this, but up in London I've seen and done things as 'ud make your 'air stand on end. This sing'lar mark on my left cheek now, was occasioned by a female as we'd found drunk in the streets, and was carryin' to the station on a stretcher."

"Come, come, Ted! the ladies don't want to hear about them low goings on," inter-

posed Mrs. Weedon. "What do you suppose they know about rows in the streets, and drunkenness, and all that goes on in the lower class? and no call for them to know it, neither."

Geraldine, however, would not have been disinclined to pursue the theme, and obtain the benefit of the constable's metropolitan experiences, had not Ellen at the moment diverted her thoughts by pointing out a little blooming girl who came creeping into the kitchen, her finger in her mouth, and her downcast eyes almost hidden under her long, fair hair.

"Is that your grandchild, Mrs. Weedon?" inquired Ellen. "What a little sweetie, to be sure!"

Mrs. Weedon replied in the affirmative, and beckoned the child forward. Dolly advanced with a rueful expression that portended calamity, and too much absorbed to notice the strangers, began to speak in an accent whose purity and refinement startled Geraldine.

"I've lost the sixpence, please Granny, so I couldn't buy the butter. I couldn't help it really, because a great turkey-cock jumped upon my back as I was getting over the stile, and he must have stolen the money while I was running away from him. Shall I go back to the village, and beg a copper of somebody to make it up?" she added, with

an immoral confusion of idea between respectable poverty and mendicancy.

"You have forgotten your reverence to the ladies, child, I think," returned her grandmother, only noticing her tale of woe by a transitory frown.

Thus adjured, Dolly dropped a rustic bob. Ellen, feeling herself in duty bound to behave with cordiality towards any connection of the favoured Mrs. Weedon, shook hands, and Geraldine, springing forward, threw her arms round the child's neck and covered the sweet upturned face with kisses. Dolly's troubled look vanished; a sudden smile kindled on her lips, and putting up her dimpled hand she patted the kind young lady's cheek.

"Won't you come and sit on my knee, you little duck?" said Geraldine, lifting the small form in her strong young arms.

"Cert'nly, my darling, my darling," was the hearty answer, at which Ellen laughed with shocked amusement, and Mrs. Weedon offered up an apology.

"I hope, miss, you'll pass over the liberty she takes; I haven't got her into proper ways as yet. Her ma set up to be a fine lady, you know," she added in a lower key, "but, for all that, Dolly must learn to respect her betters and do her duty in the state of life to which it has pleased God to call her."

"D'ye mind what I told you, Doll," said

the policeman, turning on the child with a magisterial frown, "that if I did hear of any more such shameful carelessness, I should take leave to make you and Granny's tickle-toby more closer acquainted?"

Dolly, on hearing this dreadful threat, clung yet more closely to her protectress, who, after fumbling in her purse, held forth at last a shilling to the policeman. "There is the money that Dolly has lost, and something over for yourself," she said imperially. "I make it a particular request that you will say no more to her about it, and I hope, Mr. Weedon, that you never really beat her."

Mr. Weedon, too much taken aback to resent the young lady's tone of command, accepted the shilling in blank amazement, and Dolly's demonstrations of eager gratitude became quite overpowering.

"She is not much like her poor father, is she?" observed Ellen, after scrutinizing the child attentively.

Mrs. Weedon fidgeted a little in her chair, then rose and fetched down from the mantleshelf a daguerrotype of a lanky youth, on whom the unwonted honours of black clothes and heavily pomatumed hair seemed to sit uneasily. "She wouldn't be so unlike him, Miss Ellen, if she had her hair cut off short as poor folks ought to't."

"Ah!" said the policeman, "my Lord himself remarked to me yesterday, mother,

as how our little maid would be all the 'ealthier for being cropped, but I don't know what Stephen and Jeames would say to it, Doll—they'd have nothin' to pull when they looked in of an evenin'!"

"Footmen have no business to pull my hair," answered Dolly, "I shall put it in a net when they come."

"That's her poor father, Miss Egerton," whispered Mrs. Weedon, dusting the daguerrotype as she handed it to Geraldine. "He 'listed and went as a soldier when he was but seventeen, and he stayed away twenty year from home. Miss Ellen has told you about him, I daresay, and how he got murdered for his money, poor dear—enough to break my heart, I'm sure, to lose him like that, just as I'd got him safe back again. The 'ooman next door was wife to the bad fellow that did it, and she's been a'most crazy ever since the night when he come in sudden upon her, all one solid dab of blood. Sally's never seen or heard nothing of him since, and the Lord alone knows what's gone with him. I often say, I ought to be thankful that my senses have been spared to me," she added, not looking at her hearers, but keeping her tearless eyes fastened on the wall, "for 'twas a bad blow to me to hear my boy was dead—knocked down without time to make a prayer."

"I'm sure it is very nice of you to take so much notice as you do of poor Sally Tibbetts,

considering whose wife she is," remarked Ellen, in the awkward pause that succeeded the old lady's ebullition of maternal feeling. Geraldine was feeling too much awed by the unusual nature of her affliction to express any sympathy except by solemn silence.

"What should I have any feeling against her for, missy? She's as innocent of wishing harm to me or mine as the babe unborn."

"I should like to have one peep at this old crazy woman, if there is time enough left for it," murmured Geraldine, apart to Ellen.

"Then perhaps we had better say good-bye at once," said Ellen, seizing on the excuse, without which she would have sat on for an indefinite time, too timid to suggest a move. "We're so pleased, Mrs. Weedon, to have found you at home."

"And I'm right glad you come in just when you did, Miss Ellen," answered Mrs. Weedon, rising. "I only come down from the Castle an hour ago to get some of my things together, and I'm going back again as soon as I've given Ted his dinner, for Lord Berkeley's very poorly indeed, and I'm helping nuss him."

"Yes, so I've heard; I hope he'll soon be better. Good-morning, Mrs. Weedon. Good-day, Mr. Weedon."

The abode of Sally Tibbetts—the "witch," as the village children termed her—though only a few paces removed from that of Mrs. Weedon, was not the property of Lord

Rotherhame, and it presented a marked contrast to the smart parlour and cosy kitchen of her more fortunate neighbour. A damp earth path led right under the drippings of the thatch to the door, which, even on the coldest winter days, stood widely open to permit the egress of the smoke. As the young ladies entered, unearthly sounds of wheezing, straining, and truly churchyard coughing, met their ears, and their nostrils were greeted by a mingled odour of smoke and bad potatoes. Over the decaying embers cowered a shrivelled crone, her thin grey locks straggling down on her shoulders from under a huge black bonnet, which swayed ominously with each oscillation of her frame. As Ellen advanced she turned upon her for a moment her bloodshot eyes—light eyes of a fading blue, which seemed to have lost their colour by age and wear—and regarded her with an expression of mild imbecility. Then, without any sign of recognition, she stooped again over the fire, muttering and rocking herself wearily to and fro. Geraldine found it hard to believe that anything like life or love could ever have been known to this feeble, decrepit wreck of mortality, with her snuff-blackened nose, and sinewy chin covered with the thick white down of extreme old age. Filled with a species of silent horror, she left Ellen to make screaming efforts at conversation, and seating herself on a low stool, took a meditative survey of the squalid



kitchen—the deal table covered with a rag of filthy carpet, the corner cupboard, whose broken doors displayed the stores of Mrs. Tibbetts's housekeeping—two cracked plates, a greenish fragment of cheese, some lard, and a few untempting cold potatoes. The broken staircase was supplemented by a ladder, and the foggy outer air stirred the dust and cobwebs on the crazy furniture, and penetrated through the gaping cracks of the mud walls.

“This then,” she reflected, “was once the home of the mysterious murderer, who, like Cain, is now wandering branded on the face of the earth. Could there ever have been a time when the fire blazed cheerfully on this blasted hearth, when the lean pussy purred contentedly on the footstool, when Sally Tibbetts—a young wife—took pride in keeping her cottage bright and clean and set out on Sundays to church, leaning happily on her husband's arm? Does the ghost of that by-gone bliss still haunt her cold fireside? Does the memory of past days of sunshine ever come back now, to fret her by its mocking contrast with the dreary present and the drearier future?” And then she pictured to herself the stage of life's journey that yet remained for old Sally to traverse—the few years during which she would still cower over the smoke, alive to nothing but a vague sense of discomfort, conscious of no change, as the varying seasons passed over her head,

but the gradually sharpening pangs of rheumatism and disease, the succeeding months dragged out on a coarse mattress under the heavy rafters of the low-roofed attic overhead, the deal coffin that would one day be lifted down the ladder and left to rot forgotten in a nameless grave. Must not all be at an end then for Sally Tibbetts? Did not her mental and moral self seem dwindling away to nothingness, with her withered worn out frame? After a few more years' decay, would aught survive to inherit the shining mansions of the pure in heart? And yet, might it not be that the quickening air of Eternity, blowing in through the ruined tenement of flesh, upon the well-nigh extinguished god-like spark within, would at last rekindle it to a glad strong light, which undarkened by earth's foul atmosphere, would shine more and more unto the perfect day?

If such a hope indeed remained, pity was wasted on imbecile old Sally. She would pass to a brilliant future, unsaddened by any regret for the past. Life ends ordinarily less bitterly to the poor than to the rich! For the rich it has been, in most cases, keen, varied, fruitful in experience, intense in interest; for the poor, a struggle from its beginning, which, at last, leaves them wearied out, glad of such rest and shelter as the churchyard can afford. And thus it seemed natural enough that Sally should babble composedly of the day that was com-

ing, when it should be her turn to be "tucked up under the moulds," and should calmly instruct Ellen that it was her wish "if so be as her old man should come back after she was gone, that he should confess his wickedness to the gentlefolks, and read his Bible. For better," said she, "he should be hanged in this here world, than burn by hell-fire in t'other."

The girls rose and left the kitchen, Sally being too much absorbed in muttering moralities up the chimney to pay any attention to their farewell salutations. Geraldine followed her companion across the weedy garden, which contrasted oddly with the neat box-bordered beds that lay on the other side of the yew hedge—a saddened look darkening her bright young face. Already Life began to puzzle her, already its load of sins and sorrows pressed heavily on her mind, to which they had hitherto appeared but as the dark back-ground thrown in to enhance the dramatic effect of a beautiful picture.

A loud noise of sobbing attracted her attention as they passed into the lane, and catching Ellen by the arm, Geraldine made her crouch down quickly behind the hedge.

"Hush, listen!" she whispered, and as they waited in silence the sound of a heavy thump became distinctly audible.

"He is beating her, the wretch," exclaimed Geraldine, scarlet with indignation, "come with me, and let us rescue her!" She sprang

up from her crouching posture, and turning found herself face to face with Lord Rotherhame. He started when he saw her rise out of the ditch, laughed and took off his hat, while Ellen, in dire confusion, hurriedly admonished her companion: "Be careful what you say, Geraldine, remember what favourites the Weedons are."

"Good morning, young ladies," said Lord Rotherhame. "Do you expect to find prim-roses in January, Ellen, or for what purpose do you make Miss Egerton kneel down in a soaking ditch?"

"We were hiding because we heard little Dolly Weedon crying, and wanted to find out whether they were ill-using her," replied Geraldine, with a frankness which made Ellen's hair stand on end. "She lost a sixpence just now, and I paid them a shilling to forgive her, and yet that horrid policeman is beating her after all. Won't you come with us and insist on his letting her alone?"

"Certainly I will," answered Lord Rotherhame, colouring a little, but not otherwise displaying any of the indignation which Ellen expected at this presumptuous invasion of his *protégé's* rights. "Those cries do sound rather doleful, I confess," and he quickened his pace as the noise increased. "They seem to proceed from the wood-stable behind the house."

Geraldine and Ellen, in breathless expectation, followed him closely as he made his

way to the back of the cottage, but Dolly's roars so drowned the sound of their footsteps that Mr. Weedon remained totally ignorant of their approach, till Lord Rotherhame suddenly pulling open the rough door, he was disclosed to full view, standing among piles of straw and wood faggots, a well-worn slipper in his hand, and his little victim palpitating in the grasp of his stalwart arm.

"Let that child go, Weedon," said Lord Rotherhame, with a cool peremptory decision, which at once liberated the weeping Dolly, and changed the menacing posture of the policeman's arm into a salute.

"I beg your Lordship's pardon," he began, with an unctuous servility which seemed to beseech his Lordship to make a footstool of him. "I'd not a notion your Lordship was passing, or I'd have stopped the gurl's noise, but mother had wished me to give her a little chastisement for a misdemeanour on the property. She has been a' drivin' of turkeys, and mother can't abear to see no harm done to nothing of your Lordship's."

"Is it not dreadful to see a huge man beating a little girl?" exclaimed Geraldine, unable to repress her burning indignation.

"You hear what this lady says, Ned? I am quite of her opinion. The little creature seems inconsolable. What can we do for her? Give me that shilling which Miss Egerton bestowed upon you on the under-

standing that you would remit your vengeance." Lord Rotherhame addressed him in a half negligent, half contemptuous tone of banter, and taking the shilling which the policeman obsequiously tendered to him, he turned and held it out to Dolly.

"There is something for you to spend, little girl, go and buy yourself some lollipops. I declare you can hardly see through that shock of hair—your grandmother should relieve you of the encumbrance."

"O, don't say that," interposed Geraldine. "Just now, when they were talking about cutting it off, the poor little thing said that her father used to like her long hair, and she almost cried at the idea."

"Did she?" replied Lord Rotherhame, his deep voice sounding a little deeper as he gazed down on the fair child, who, timidly advancing to take the money, and as yet unable to speak for sobs, held up her rosy lips towards the tall strange gentleman, to whose kindness she owed her deliverance.

"She wants to kiss Lord Rotherhame," tittered Ellen from the background.

Lord Rotherhame laughed also, but a little to Geraldine's surprise, bestowed merely a careless nod upon the child and turned away without accepting her offered salute.

"There!" he said, as they came out into the lane, "in getting your shilling away from Weedon to bestow it on his victim, I flatter myself that I have effected a rather judicious

combination of justice and economy. Will you ask, by the way, Ellen, if not inconvenient to Miss Barnes, whether I may bring Mr. Murray-Carr to lunch at the Rectory to-day? He is in rather a desolate condition, poor fellow, Berkeley not being well enough yet to leave his room."

Ellen uttered her thanks for the proposed honour in accents of profound gratitude, and the little group separated in contrary directions.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

Times go by turns, and chances change by course,  
From foul to fair, from better hap to worse.

SOUTHWELL.

It was with a peculiar but not altogether novel fluttering of the heart, that Geraldine prepared herself that morning for the Doctor's early dinner. Not altogether novel, for according to the wont of imaginative girlhood she had had her heroes—some purely the creations of her fancy, others the immortalized of history, such as Cœur de Lion and Charles the Martyr. Hero-worship though among the sublimest of human passions, has often by folly and want of self-control been degraded into the most inane of its sentimental weaknesses. Yet even as copper, no less than gold, bears the royal image, so in its most debased forms hero-worship carries on its face the imprint of divinity. It is the instinctive looking upward of God-made humanity, the unconscious dissatisfaction of souls created for the enjoyment of something beyond themselves—the Eternal and the Infinite!

Mingling with the familiar sensations of excitement and pleasure at having a fresh object round whose temples her fancy could weave an ideal crown, was a flavour of something else, some emotion quite new and



bewilderingly delicious. An emotion which she could not analyse, and about which speech would have been sacrilege—a spiritual emotion whose shrine was her soul, and whose counterpart in material things might be the gurgle of waters imprisoned in a grotto, the ravishing scent of a flower of spring, the cutting of the air by a bird's wing, the first spark of a perfumed fire, the mysterious shudder of electricity !

Half-past one had struck, and the Rectory household were assembled at early dinner. Dr. Bogle's dining-room made no scruple at all about proclaiming to the world the object for which it existed. Everything about it bore more or less directly on eating. The dark red paper suggested port wine, and the magenta curtains were impregnated with archæological associations of by-gone dinners. The mahogany side-board absorbed pretty well one whole side of the room, and was on the present occasion hospitably decorated with varieties of good sound wine. There were sufficient chairs to seat a tolerably large party, a magenta drugget concealed by a far spreading crumb cloth, and a long dining-table which, garnished in its centre by a good sized cruet-stand, and at either end by a dish, seemed to say : " Why disguise by an idle paraphernalia of dessert and flowers the honest fact that meat—strong, juicy, unornamented meat—is the staff and comfort of human life." The company assembled round

the board had evidently taken this lesson home, they had come there to eat, and eat they did. Geraldine, as she stole guiltily in, five minutes after the appointed hour, found the Doctor hard at work on the mutton chops—immense chops, whose long stiff bones refused to bend themselves to the correct circle, by means of which, and the hasty addition of a dab of mashed potato, Miss Barnes had endeavoured to impart an elegant appearance to the clumsy viands, when the news that “the Earl” was expected had come upon her. Miss Bartholomew was ladling out pig’s fry, secretly shocked by the ill-concealed eagerness with which her pupils pestered her with applications for the delicacy, and Lord Rotherhame had taken the carving-knife and fork from his hostess’s hands and was sawing desperately at some ragged ribs of beef. The Doctor was too busy carving and talking to heed the delinquent’s entrance, and Miss Bartholomew seemed the only person alive to the enormity of her late appearance. She slipped quietly into the empty place, by Robert’s side, and was loudly welcomed by her admirer.

“Here you are, Geraldine,” he exclaimed, slapping the chair beside him, triumphantly, “I’ve kept your place. What’ll you have? Beef, chops, or pig’s fry? If the fry, you should go in for it sharp, before the others have gobbled it all up.”

“Beef, please—no, mutton—I hardly know

which," she answered, gazing around her with a hopeless look, as she perceived the gravy congealing in the chop dish. "A scrap of beef, please."

"Done with our kitchener!" put in the Doctor, "a thing no housekeeper should be without. You couldn't tell it wasn't roast on a spit, could you, my Lord? In fact, it's more delicious baked than roast to my fancy."

Lord Rotherhame who had been inwardly wondering how he should dispose of the mass of sodden beef, with its flat-iron flavour, which, rejected by the elder Miss Bogle when the pig's fry appeared, had been set down before him by the parlour-maid, replied with hollow politeness, and a dim view to his own future deliverance from the duty of finishing his plateful, that "it was capital, and he really thought went a good deal further than the ordinary roast meat."

Baked potatoes, likewise successfully damped by the kitchener, now went the round, and the greens, following suit, enlivened plate after plate with their fragrant presence.

Discussion now arose as to the dinners of the younger children, of which dish they should partake, and in what quantities—whether salt was a necessary and mustard a harmless condiment, with reference to their young and sensitive digestions. "Such an anxiety with motherless children," Nina

murmured, visibly affected, when Miss Bartholomew thwarted Percy's precocious desire for Harvey sauce, and insisted instead on cabbage as purifying to the blood. Lord Rotherhame, carried away, as it appeared to Geraldine, by the stream, in a state of passive endurance, made no effort to turn the current of conversation, but the Archdeacon was not long in broaching a political theme, and that with such force of will that the Doctor's attention was successfully diverted, and from that moment the continuous working of his powerful jaws and loud smacking of his lips, were the only signs by which he manifested any consciousness that he was engaged in the serious work of dining.

The Archdeacon always had some one ruling idea which, while it was in the ascendant, absorbed his mind to the exclusion of all others. Sometimes it was an anecdote that had caught his fancy, sometimes an invasion of Church privilege on the part of the State, at others a murder, or a question of foreign policy. He was a patriot to the backbone, and had no sympathy for the emasculated sentiment which vaguely prefers the general welfare of the world to the honour of the country.

"Depend upon it," he said, "that this pretended zeal for Humanity in the abstract, is only another form of personal selfishness. Patriotism demands at times heroism, the sacrifice of home, strength and life, and

Pudding came in, in the course of time, and Lord Rotherhame was discovered to have his plateful of beef almost untouched before him. Great consternation was expressed. "Was the meat high, or not sufficiently cooked? Had he lost his appetite?" A flood of polite negatives were not sufficient to allay the Doctor's hospitable uneasiness, and Lord Rotherhame was well nigh bewildered by the amount of friendly offers against which he had to defend himself—the "drop of soup that could be warmed in a minute," the "cold rabbit pie providentially left from breakfast." He resolved to seek refuge in a pudding. An immense open tart of black currant jam and putty had made its appearance, and behind it the inevitable solid plain pudding. He fled to the pudding. "Might he ask for a bit of sago, *after* the young ladies had been attended to," for, hardly were the words out of his lips, than he beheld the Doctor, with a huge flourish, sending him off a handsome portion while the plates of his young lady guests remained empty.

"The Archdeacon has not yet fulfilled his promise of coming to see over my old house, Mrs. Egerton," said Lord Rotherhame, when a lull in the conversation enabled him to make his voice heard at her end of the table. "Won't you fix a day before the end of the week to come to luncheon, and wander about afterwards?"

"Nothing should I like better, thank you very much—that is, if our kind hostess approves."

"You would come too, would you not, Miss Barnes, and bring the whole party?"

Miss Barnes yielded a smiling assent.

"We have been longing," she said, "to show Mrs. Egerton the Castle. She, I think, has quite as great a love for the picturesque as the Archdeacon for the antique. We must warn the Archdeacon, by the way, Mrs. Egerton, to leave his Murray behind him. Lord Rotherhame likes to explain everything himself, and indeed knows a good deal more than any guide book."

"If the Archdeacon will only desert his Murray, I will promise he shall lack no necessary information," said Lord Rotherhame. "My only fear is that he may get too much. I am painfully conscious of being an egotist, Mrs. Egerton. Unpopular people always are egotists, driven thereto I suppose, by the knowledge that they must care for themselves if they wish to be cared for at all. While I am dawdling about the old rooms, running through their histories to an auditor whom I fondly believe to be interested, I am a happy man. Experience teaches me no wisdom. My friends' kind professions delude me afresh, time after time, and it is not till the hour of their departure arrives, and I mark a look of harassed anxiety when the carriage does not appear punctually, and a

gleam of natural pleasure when the last good-bye is said, that I wake from my dream of bliss."

"All I can say is, that if you are not mistaken in them, your friends must be, begging their pardons, a set of ignorant stupid geese," returned Mrs. Egerton, with emphatic warmth. "No fear that you will weary *us*, and I hope that you will pour out everything you know, and show us all the odd nooks and corners. We shall most thoroughly enjoy it."

Lord Rotherhame smiled with obvious pleasure.

"I shall need no second invitation, if you will promise to stop me when I begin to bore you," he answered. "Shall we say Friday, and lunch at one, that we may have a long afternoon? Your daughters may like to see the stables. Miss Barnes tells me they are wonderful horsewomen, and I wish that Miss Egerton would ride my son's bay mare. Now that he is laid up, she gets no exercise, and she is a perfect lady's horse."

"Most kind and handsome, I am sure," inserted the Doctor between Mrs. Egerton's acknowledgments, and at this moment the entrance of the parlour-maid, with a face in which an untold boding of woe contended with irrepressible pleasure at the importance of announcing it, broke in alarmingly upon the conversation.

"Is anything the matter, Sarah?" asked s Barnes, tremulously.

"Please ma'am—a footman from the Castle has brought a telegraph for his Lordship."

"Is that all?" said Lord Rotherhame, smiling. "May I open it, Miss Barnes?"

"Oh, by all means—pray don't wait a moment," she answered, in a tremor of nervous anticipation, and an agitated pause ensued, during which Lord Rotherhame opened the terrible missive with really provoking deliberation.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" enquired the Doctor.

"Rather serious, I fear," he returned with a look of concern. "My poor old aunt is dangerously ill, it seems, and wished me to be sent for at once. I must get to Grand Court to-night if possible."

"The Dowager Duchess!" cried Miss Barnes. "How very shocking and unexpected!"

"Yes, *unexpected*, as you say," said Lord Rotherhame, with a dreamy look. "She is the last person one would think to hear of setting off on a solitary journey to the undiscovered Country, the first she has ever undertaken without her cards and her poodle. Here is another instance of the maliciousness of fate, my aunt allowed to solve the problem which others are wild to fathom, and about the explanation of which she has never cared a rush."

Lord Rotherhame's manner of receiving and moralising over the sad tidings, which



had put all other faces at the table into mourning, tickled Geraldine irresistibly, and she smiled a broad, humourous smile. He perceived it, and was suddenly seized by a misgiving that he had struck unawares a discordant note in the prevailing harmony of woe.

"It is now exactly half-past two," he said, glancing at his watch. "If I go home at once, and make my little preparations, I shall catch the four o'clock up-train. Will you let me run away before dessert, Miss Barnes?" he added, a plateful of pale, sour-looking oranges on the sideboard catching his eye. "I have no time to lose."

"By all means, my dear Lord!" burst in the Doctor, overpowering his sister-in-law's feminine assent, and as Lord Rotherhame retired to the hall to don his great-coat, he hastened after him and offered the support of his arm, with every expression of sympathy. Lord Rotherhame, who felt by no means incapable of walking alone, rejected the proffered aid with evident surprise, and disappeared accompanied by his host. In the course of a few moments he returned to make his adieux. "I am particularly sorry to be called from home just now," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Egerton, "as it puts an end to my hope of seeing you on Friday. Is there any chance of my still finding you here on my return, probably about a week hence?"

"O, my dear Lord Rotherhame, we shall be taking wing, I fear, this very next Saturday. Perhaps, however, you will allow us to keep to our engagement of going to look over the Castle, sadly as we shall miss the pleasure of your promised escort."

"Pray do. My daughters will do their little best to entertain you. Good-bye," to Geraldine, whom he had now reached, "you will ride the bay one day before you go, I hope?"

Geraldine felt her hand resting for a moment in his. A sickness of disappointment came over her, all her brilliant anticipations of vague delights to be enjoyed on Friday clouded by a sudden chilly mist. Assuming a formal smile, she answered that "she should enjoy a ride immensely."

In the general confusion that accompanied his departure, Gertrude, who, with a loyal sympathy shared in her degree all her sister's sensations, crossed over to her, and whispered to her to come out into the hall and see the last of him. "This really is too exasperating," she murmured as they left the room together. "It will be as if the sun were blotted out of the sky, being at Rotherhame when he is gone."

"Silly child!" answered Geraldine, a little ashamed that her heart should sink so heavily at the departure of a comparative stranger. "But it really is rather unfortunate that he should be called away just now. We shall

lose sight of him before we have had any chance of cementing his acquaintance. Oh, Gertrude, I wish that the Duchess had been a little more considerate, and not chosen this day out of all her many years on which to die."

The hall door stood open, and a cutting blast swept in. Luckily, there were no idle knick-knacs in Dr. Bogle's entrance hall, and the wind could not greatly discompose the solid mahogany chairs, the grey marble table, or the brown varnished hat-stand. Their father and Dr. Bogle were at the door, and once more they heard Lord Rotherhame's voice. He was lingering on the step outside, speaking to the Archdeacon. "I am so disappointed not to have seen more of you, Archdeacon," he was saying cordially, "but I hear there is some chance of your being in town this spring for Convocation, if so, we may meet, I hope."

As he rode off, the sisters ran to the window and looked out. They watched him canter up the turf slope by the Forest, on which dark oases of sodden green showed themselves among grimy patches of dissolving snow. The sky was low and hard, and there was a bitter look about the cold glum world, as though some supernatural chemist had spilt a huge bottle of quinine upon its surface. But, to Geraldine, although her new hero had vanished out of sight, it seemed to have grown May-like, for his parting

words: "We shall meet, I hope," had opened before her radiant possibilities, vistas of intercourse and increasing friendship in the days to come.

The few remaining days of the Egertons' visit to Rotherhame passed quickly enough. One of them was wiled away in a detailed exploration of the Castle, whose air of ghostliness and grim antiquity more than realised the romantic expectation formed of it by the sisters. It was some slight compensation to Geraldine for the absence of Lord Rotherhame to have this opportunity of making closer acquaintance with his daughter, and their parting on Lettice's side was almost tearful. She had scarcely ever had a companion of her own age, and Geraldine with her merriment, her random frankness, and genial warmth of heart, had come like refreshing sunlight into her life of rather colourless monotony.

So impatient was the Archdeacon to behold once more his home, and the faces of his little children, to wander freely about his own places, and breathe again the air of a house where freedom at times went dangerously near the limits of that dark state described by Miss Bartholomew as license; so desirous was he to shake his hard-worked Curate by the hand, to comfort his heart with his best port, and the last basket of game from his elder brother's property in the North, that he turned a deaf ear to the care.

fully planned schemes by which his travel-loving wife proposed to include Devonshire, London and Cornwall in her homeward progress, and triumphantly took his tickets to Grantham direct.

The Reverend Herbert Meules acknowledged the respectful attentions offered him by the admiring Miss Nutting throughout her sojourn at the Rectory, by coming in person to the station to see her off, and by promising to use his influence with the Editor of the *Earnest Churchwoman* to procure the admission to its pages of a touching narrative of a consumptive little chorister boy, written by herself a year before, and already twice rejected by that literary luminary.

Ellen and Mary, who had accompanied their young friends on foot to the station, clung fondly to their arms as Mrs. Egerton beckoned them into the cruel railway carriage which was to carry them away, with all the bright intercourse, the fun, the wonder, the vague longings after freedom, that they had brought with them to the depressed victims of Miss Bartholomew's systematic training. But the inexorable bell rang, the last embraces were exchanged, and the thrill of rapture which *would* come when Geraldine thought of the dear home for which she was bound, faded at the reflection that she was leaving her hapless companions alone and unprotected in the

house of bondage. Leaning out of the window as the train began to move she thrust a carefully folded paper into Ellen's hand. "I wish it were more," she whispered, "but it is all I have. You must divide it between you."

Ellen looked her thanks, but it was not till her weary plod homewards was over and she was alone in her own room, that she found leisure to examine the contents of her packet—some onyx studs, a tiny gold pencil case, and the sum of seven and sixpence in silver. Geraldine had delayed the presentation of her parting gift till the last moment, fearing lest the modesty of her friends should induce them to reject it.

The train moved slowly out of the station, followed by the dull tear-stained gaze of the forsaken Bogles, and the waving handkerchiefs of their father and Robert, which last gentleman had further consoled the parting guests by an unsolicited assurance that he should before long come and look them up at South Grantham.

With outstretched heads Geraldine and Gertrude waved their adieux, nor did they move from the window before the clustered towers of the Castle had become visible, rising above the town, and again in their turn had slowly disappeared. Then Geraldine sank down in her place by her mother's side, and said: "Now father, you have my free

leave to enjoy to the full your long-lamented Roman remains."

"And now, farewell regrets; and three cheers for home and freedom," added Gertrude, joyfully, while the Archdeacon, with unimpaired archæological zeal, hurried, guide-book in hand, to take his child's vacated seat at the open window.

END OF VOL. I.











